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## **Foundations of Post-Prophetic Governance in Early Islam: Participatory Authority, Accountable Leadership, and Justice-Centered Sovereignty in the First Caliphal Sermon**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper takes a rhetorical and conceptual approach to analyzing the inaugural sermon of the first Caliph Abu Bakr as-Siddiq (RA). The sermon was delivered after the passing away of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Emerging from a period of political instability and communal grief, the sermon was far from just a ritual; it was essentially a programmatic manifesto that stipulated the moral groundwork of leadership post the Prophet. Through close reading and analysis of the text, the article reveals three intertwined concepts which together constituted the very foundation of early Islamic political thought. On the one hand, *Participatory Authority* sees ruling as a shared ethical responsibility of the ruler and the community. On the other hand, *Accountable Leadership* portrays obedience as a behavior that is dependent on the conditions that the authority can be publicly corrected. And finally, *Justice-Centered Sovereignty* describes the main role of the state as the restoration of people's rights and the ethical regulation of power. In view of this, the present work is essentially the analysis of a sermon which can be considered a pioneering expression of ideas such as accountability and justice, which with time have been incorporated in the Islamic political discourse.



## Literature Review

Earlier Islamic political formation has been the center of focus for most recent studies of early Islam in terms of authority, legitimacy, and governance of the Muslim community. Nuclear research such as Madelung's (1997) *The Succession to Muhammad* is concerned with the politics of the appointment of Abu Bakr and the debates that constituted the early caliphate. Madelung locates the act amidst the dispute over the claims to the right, and he presents a historical recreation of the politics of succession. At the same time, Donner (2010) views the early Islamic leadership from the perspective of community formation and insists that the authority of the first generation was so closely linked with the religious commitment and the sense of community identity that they were inseparable. These authors give us valuable historical configurations of the socio, political contexts wherein Abu Bakr's (RA) inaugural sermon took place.

Both Crone (2004) and Lewis (1988) are two of the scholars in the field who have examined the unfolding of political thought in Islam, for instance, the shifting nature of caliphal authority and sovereignty. Their works reveal how the early examples became, over time, the principles of political theory. These articles, however, mainly depict early khutbahs as historical testimonies rather than as rhetorically crafted political discourses. Zaman (2002) delves into the interplay between the ulema and political power and shows that concepts of accountability and moral responsibility became, over time, part of the institutional framework. Despite the fact that these publications shed light on the ideological development of Islamic governance, they frequently do not closely investigate the linguistic and rhetorical features of the early khutbah text.

Hence, although the current literature has extensively covered the historical and political background of the early caliphate, there is still a significant deficiency in the aspect of viewing Abu Bakr's (RA) first sermon as a deliberate political rhetoric act. This article intends to fill that void by putting the sermon under the lens of *Participatory Authority*, *Accountable Leadership*, and *Justice-Centered Sovereignty*, thus mixing historical context with rhetorical analysis and deepening our insight into early Islamic oratory.

## Historical Context of the Inaugural Sermon

The first sermon of Caliph Abu Bakr (RA) came out in 11 AH / 632 CE, right after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when the history of Islam was very vulnerable and the situation uncertain. The death of the Prophet caused not only deep sorrow in the hearts of Muslims but left the community



without its leader. Muslims in Madinah had to find a new leader urgently at the time when the Arabian Peninsula had just been united.

Directly after the Prophet's passing, the Ansar held a meeting at *Saqifah Bani Saidah* to figure out the next leadership. Their concern was that the community might split politically, and also that the leadership should stay in Madinah, the first political base of Islam. The *Muhajirun*, among them Abu Bakr (RA), Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA), and Abu Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah (RA), also came to the meeting. The atmosphere was serious and the decision was important. Umar (RA), after the discussions, gave his support (*bayah*) to Abu Bakr (RA), and the rest of the people there followed, thus he became the first Caliph (Khalifat-ur-Rasulullah). The following day, a public *bayah* was taken in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. It was on this occasion that Abu Bakr (RA) delivered his inaugural sermon.

### **The Atmosphere of Crisis**

The sermon was hardly delivered in a normal and politically uneventful environment. Instead, it was facing the situations of multiple crises happening at the same time:

1. **Emotional Shock** – Most of the companions were deeply sorrowful. Umar (RA) himself was at first emotionally unaccepting of the Prophets passing away. Stability demanded an instant moral uplifting.
2. **Tribal Instability** – After the Prophets death, several Arab tribes would start to withdraw their political allegiance. Some would refuse to pay *zakat* while others might follow the false-claimant prophets like *Musaylamah*. This would be later on the *Ridda* (Apostasy) Wars.
3. **Uncertainty of Authority** – During the Prophet's time, his spiritual, legislative, and political leadership was combined in one person. Now that revelation has ceased, the question of what post, prophetic authority means and how far it extends has become an issue.
4. **Fear of Internal Division** – The meeting of *Saqifah* was a proof that political disagreement was possible. Quickly the unity has to be preserved or factionalism will take place. Abu Bakr's (RA) sermon was, in a way, a constitutional and moral charter of the new Islamic state in this treacherous atmosphere, where his speech was only a phrase of usurping the old era of the Islamic state and proclaiming his authority.

In this challenging setting, Abu Bakr's (RA) sermon functioned as a constitutional and moral charter for the new Islamic state. The first sermon of Abu Bakr (RA) was not just a formal speech at the



beginning of his caliphate. Rather, it was a powerful message of stability and reassurance to the Islamic community which at that time, was in a very precarious situation. The style of his speech shows that he was trying to manage a crisis, give moral support, and make the community understand their constitution.

He began the sermon as:

أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، فَإِنِّي قَدْ وُلِّيتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَكُنتُ بِخَيْرِكُمْ

*O people, I have been given authority over you, though I am not the best of you.*

The opening of the sermon, plays the role of the basic statement that politically and rhetorically delineates the entire sermon. It was a time filled with intense uncertainty after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when these words were spoken. They instantly change the understanding of post, prophetic leadership. Abu Bakr (RA) identifies the difference between holding power and being inherently superior. Without hesitation, he denies being the best among them in doing so, he rules out the possibility that political leadership could mean spiritual rank, moral perfection, or divine infallibility. After such a community that had just seen prophet's authority, an authority that could not be separated from revelation and moral impeccability, this articulation was very necessary. In a definitive way it stops the sacralization of the caliphal office and therefore establishes that leadership after the Prophet (PBUH) is human, fallible, and morally accountable.

The choice of wording is equally important. Abu Bakr (RA) says, "I have been given authority," which is a passive sentence construction that gently moves the emphasis away from personal ambition or self-assertion. He doesn't say that he took power or that he deserves it because of his own excellence. Rather, he depicts authority as something that has been given to him by the community through the *bayah* process and ultimately under divine guidance. His choice of words depicts government as *amanah* (trust) and not a privilege. Thus, the source of legitimacy is shifted from personal superiority to communal recognition and moral accountability. Authority is something that one must carry as a burden rather than a status to be proud of.

From a rhetorical point of view, the statement serves as a highly effective display of humility. However, this humility is not only personal but also a political maneuver. The situation around the appointment at *Saqifah Bani Saidah* might have caused tension or dissatisfaction among the factions. By openly admitting that he is not the best among them, Abu Bakr (RA) prevents people from becoming



angry and makes it easier psychologically for them to accept the ruler. His humility calms the community down and allows them to believe that the leadership will not be oppressive or exclusive. Instead of gaining power by boasting, he secures the state by being ethically modest. When unity was very weak, such a speech enabled the transformation of authority from a disputed right to a joint duty. In addition, this statement sets forth the idea that all humans are equal in the eyes of God. Abu Bakr (RA), by negating the claim of intrinsic superiority, is morally aligning himself with the rest of the community. He is not beyond the *Shariah* but below it, a subject to its rules and limitations. This scenario sets up his subsequent offer for correction: "If I do wrong, set me right." The reasoning is straightforward: if he is not the best among them, then he is still capable of making mistakes; if he is capable of making mistakes, then he must remain open to correction. Hence, the first sentence cannot be just a spontaneous gesture of humility but the very basis of responsible leadership.

Lastly, the statement signifies a very critical moment of change in the political history of Islam. While prophetic authority was always based on revelation and the prophet being divinely guided, the authority after the prophet is different; it is more administrative, council-based, and morally conditioned only. By separating himself from claims of superiority, Abu Bakr (RA) makes it clear that a caliph is not a prophet but a person who takes care of what the Prophet (PBUH) left behind. This differentiation preserves the theological limit between revelation and governance and at the same time ensures political continuity. Hence, through one sentence, the sermon achieves several different things. It confers the authority of leadership, it stops political power from being made holy, it comforts the community that has lost a loved one, and it sets the stage for a leadership model based on humility, accountability, and justice.

فَإِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ فَأَعِينُونِي، وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُ فَاصْلِحُونِي، الصِّدْقُ أَمَانَةٌ، وَالكَذِبُ خِيَانَةٌ

*If I do well, then assist me; and if I do wrong, then set me right. Truth is a trust, and falsehood is betrayal*

This part conveys the constitutional and ethical essence of Abu Bakr's (RA) inauguration speech. It changes the leadership concept from a one-man command system to a morally interactive relationship between the ruler and the community. On the formal side, the presence of conditional clauses ("If I do well... If I do wrong...") makes the authority dependent rather than absolute. The theme of government is one of service to the people and honesty, not automatic legitimacy by virtue of office. The Caliph does not insist on unconditional obedience; rather, he offers the chance to be involved and be corrected. This



way of using language goes to the root of an authoritarian possibility and changes it to a moral reciprocity.

The first clause of the sentence, "If I do well, then assist me," basically indicates the idea of participatory authority. It depicts governance as a shared work where everybody's contribution matters and success is attained by communal cooperation. The community is not a mere spectator; it has the moral obligation to aid justice once it is rightly pursued. Assistance here does not signify a follow-me attitude but a reinforcement of what is ethically correct by means of your actions. The ethical behavior of the ruler and the community's supportive engagement turn into each other's facilitators of political stability. This thereby shows that civic agency is a constituent part of early Islamic governance. The following part of the sentence, "If I do wrong, then set me right," thus makes the point of accountable leadership even more profound. By permitting censure, Abu Bakr (RA) sets a precedent for the moral checking process. The condition for obedience is that the ruler is just, and, hence, the Ummah is empowered and even has the obligation to issue the ultimatum when the authority abuses the power. The demand "make me right" is, in a way, a conferral of part of the moral authority of the community to the latter, thus giving the signal that leadership is still under ethical examination. This is very important in the post-prophetic situation: a human ruler is never perfect; thus, the administration must always be rectifiable.

The final saying, "Truth is a trust, and falsehood is betrayal," sums up the ethical basis of the relationship described here. Truth (*Sidq*) is depicted as *amanah*, a deeply held duty that both the ruler and the ruled are equally bound to. On the other hand, falsehood is *khiyanah*, betraying the trust. Therefore, the political relationship is founded on moral virtue rather than on the exercise of coercive power. Accountability is not just a matter of following the rules; it is also a matter of ethics and spirituality. Abu Bakr (RA) locates the concept of truthfulness in a trust, thereby giving governance a theology of responsibility where a departure from justice is not only a failure in administration but also a betrayal of good conscience.

وَالضَّعِيفُ فِيكُمْ قَوِيٌّ عِنْدِي حَتَّىٰ أُرِيحَ عَلَيْهِ حَقَّهُ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ. وَالْقَوِيُّ فِيكُمْ ضَعِيفٌ عِنْدِي حَتَّىٰ أَخَذَ الْحَقَّ مِنْهُ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ

*The weak among you shall be strong in my sight until I have restored his rights, if Allah wills;  
and the strong among you shall be weak in my sight until I have taken the rights from him, if*

*Allah wills...*



In this statement, Abu Bakr (RA) essentially takes the terms "strong" and "weak" and gives them a new meaning in the context of governance. He does this by questioning the natural authority of social status, tribal influence, wealth, and power and replacing them with a justice-oriented yardstick. Strength is no longer about who dominates and weakness about who gets hurt; in fact, both concepts are realigned from the perspective of rights and responsibilities.

From a rhetorical angle, the sentence is composed of a deliberate opposing sequence and balanced structure. The switching of weak and strong is not a mere coincidence since it carries out the moral inversion that it states. The weak are thus elevated to strong status in the eyes of the ruler, not due to having more material power, but because of state justice under which the ruling power is aligned with the oppressed. On the other hand, the strong become weak as soon as they violate the rights of others since the governing system is turned against injustice. The structure's symmetry strongly supports the idea of justice without bias. The government is seen as a neutral tool for bringing equilibrium rather than a preserver of the elites' privileges. Politically speaking, this declaration lays down what could be called "justice-centered sovereignty." The ruler's right to sovereignty is not measured by his ability to command, but rather by his determination to bring back rights (*Haq*). The foremost role of power is not to pursue more territory, fame, or personal strength but to correct the disorder in the community.

By making a pact with the weak to keep on supporting them until justice is attained and with the strong to restrain them till they become accountable, Abu Bakr (RA) puts the government into a moral lens where equity is given a higher priority than hierarchy. This is very relevant in a tribal society where blood relations and influence were the main determinants of one's social status. Thus, the sermon marks a radical change from tribal privilege to moral egalitarianism.

لَا يَدْعُ قَوْمٌ الْجِهَادَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا ضَرَبَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِالذُّلِّ، وَلَا تَشِيْعُ الْفَاحِشَةُ فِي قَوْمٍ قَطُّ إِلَّا عَمَّهُمُ اللَّهُ بِالْبَلَاءِ

*No people ever abandon jihad in the cause of God except that God strikes them with humiliation, and no people ever spread immorality except that God afflicts them with calamity.*

This introduces the collective moral dimension of governance in his first address. Whereas the earlier parts are more about political structure and accountability, this declaration changes the focus to the ethical health of the community as a factor of its welfare throughout the ages. It goes on to say that the people's behavior is reflected in their fate before God, and thus, it creates a doctrine of social morality



whereby the downfall of virtue inevitably leads to the weakening of politics and the suffering of the whole community.

The word jihad generally means a struggle or an effort (to advance the cause of God), and here it is in the sense of a disciplined and sustained effort to defend the community, maintain justice, and keep up the moral order. As of the time when it was revealed, these were very tangible political issues. The Muslim community was still new and small; therefore, it was exposed to tribal uprisings as well as attacks from outside. If they gave up the united effort, it wouldn't just be a defeat from the military perspective but also a loss of moral virtue. Here Abu Bakr (RA) is basically telling us that if we give up on the jihad, then we lose our respect and our power because only the committed, the sacrificial, and those who adhere to the divine principles can continue to enjoy these qualities. One should not view humiliation as random bad luck; rather, it is the result of ethical irresponsibility, according to this concept.

Similarly, the threat of spreading immorality (*fahisha*) also touches on the inner side of communal stability. Political power alone cannot save a nation if moral corruption goes unchecked. The decay of society, the spread of injustice, and the increase of public vices are the reasons for the anger of God. It is not necessary that this anger be shown in a miraculous way. It can be seen through social breakdown, crisis of confidence, and unrest. Hence, the disaster is portrayed as a moral repercussion that is a part of the society's very nature. Thus, the role of a government is not only about running the country and keeping the law; it is also about maintaining the community's moral values.

The statement, in a rhetorical sense, is a universal formulation, “No people ever...” transforming the warning into a historical principle, making the warning a historical truth rather than short-term advice. It refers to the Quranic pattern according to which communities prosper or perish depending on their adherence to morals. The use of the double structure of disgrace and disaster points up the certainty that there will be consequences. The sermon, therefore, reconciles political realism with the spiritual fact of accountability: neglecting one's duties collectively results in being externally weak, and having an internal immorality leads to one's internal downfall.

أَطِيعُونِي مَا أَطَعْتُ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ، فَإِذَا عَصَيْتُ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَلَا طَاعَةَ لِي عَلَيْكُمْ

*Obey me as long as I obey God and His Messenger. But if I disobey God and His Messenger, then you owe me no obedience.*



This last declaration is possibly the clearest constitutional statement of the whole sermon. It clearly and unmistakably restricts political authority and lays down the basic principle that obedience to the ruler is only on condition that he rules in accordance with the Sharia in an Islamic state. Secondly, it deeply roots ruling in obedience to God. Abu Bakr (RA) does not imply that he alone commands without any source or that he is the source of command; he just traces the source of his legitimacy. People's obedience to him is only legitimate as long as he is obedient to God and His messenger (PBUH). This places different authorities in their proper order: the divine revelation is at the top, and the political leadership is just below it. Hence, the Caliph is not the ultimate ruler in a total and unrestricted sense; he is governed by a higher standard. The king is the servant of the Word, not the other way around.

Secondly, the conditional clauses “as long as I obey...” and “if I disobey...” effectively change obedience from a pure and unqualified duty to an ethically contingent requirement. Loyalty to a leader is not just unthinking submission but compliance based on principles. Should the ruler go against divine guidance, then obedience would cease to be compulsory. This provision goes to the root of the matter by preventing the rise of a dictator, since it disallows the ruler to have moral autonomy apart from the Shariah. As a result, political power is a pretty limited thing by its very nature.

Thirdly, the statement is a source of empowerment for the community. In effect, by stating that there is no obedience due upon disobedience to God, Abu Bakr (RA) is communicating the Ummah's right to hold the leadership accountable in terms of divine norms without even recognizing that right. This is yet another strengthening of the earlier invitation to correction ("If I do wrong, set me right"). The notion of accountability goes beyond mere symbolism; it is fundamentally ingrained in the relationship between ruler and ruled. The community thus assumes the role of custodian of the ethical parameters within which authority is exercised.

From a rhetorical perspective, the formulation is remarkably clear. There is no ambiguity, no hedging, no defensive tone. The brevity itself seems to give it a constitutional status. It sounds less like advice and more like a principle of governance. In the delicate situation after the prophet's passing away, such accuracy was essential to avoid any misunderstanding about the power of the caliph. It not only allowed the new leader to follow the prophet's guidance but also made it clear that the caliph was a human being and therefore could err.

At the level of theology and politics, this announcement represents the key moment of breaking with the prophetic authority and the beginning of the civil leadership, which is responsible and accountable. The obedience to the Prophet (PBUH) was unconditional since his authority was the same



as the revelation. The Caliph, on the other hand, is obeyed conditionally, as he is subject to the revelation, not its author.

Within one statement, Abu Bakr (RA) sketches a governmental arrangement in which God is the ultimate sovereign, the exercise of authority is done by way of ethical compliance, and the regulation of obedience is through justice.

## **Discussion**

Abu Bakr RA's first sermon can be considered an expression of the concept of ethical governance, based upon three interdependent principles: *Participatory Authority*, *Accountable Leadership*, and *Justice-Centered Sovereignty*. The principles are, of course, not presented as mere political theories or ideals, but they rather come through the rhetorical style of the address. The three principles, therefore, constitute a consistent set of ideas that shaped the concept of authority right after the prophetic leadership.

### ***Participatory Authority***

The sermon portrays governance not only as a joint moral endeavor but also as a unilateral power-based ruling. When Abu Bakr (RA) declares his right act and then asks for help, he is making authority a collaborative and community-based matter. Governmental stability is presented as a function of not only the ruler's ability but also the ethics of the people. The community of believers cease to be mere followers of the command, and instead, through justice, they become co-workers to sustain it. Such a participatory blueprint for governance was at the heart of early Islamic political culture, and the convergence of the people thereby made them both free and happy.

### ***Accountable Leadership***

Accountable leadership is a principle that is very much connected with participatory authority. By emphasizing the limitations of political power through his call for correction and the statement that obedience is only conditional on his obedience to Allah and His Messenger, the Caliph has shown that authority has ethical boundaries and, in this case, is dependent on the law of God and the right way. Authority is not only finite but also dependent on ethical conditions. By making it clear that he might be wrong, Abu Bakr (RA) effectively made moral inquiry a permanent part of the governance structure. The leader must still follow divine law and be under the scrutiny of the community; thus, legitimacy is a matter of justice, not force. In this framework, obedience is based on principles rather than being blind, and dissent, if it is based on concern for the right, is not rebellion but the fulfillment of one's duty.



### ***Justice-Centered Sovereignty***

The pledge to re-establish the rights of the defenseless and to put a check on the strong locates justice as the central point of sovereignty. Instead of defining political power as the ability to dominate or expand, it is characterized as the power to correct the social imbalance. The rhetorical figure of the reversal of strength and weakness symbolizes this pledge: the demands of justice supersede social status. Thus, sovereignty is not a manifestation of control but serves as a means for the upholding of rights. Embedding justice in the divine will, the sermon makes sure that the ruler is answerable not only to the community but also to God. Justice is at once the reason and the standard of political power.

### ***Integrative Perspective***

Taken together, these three principles uncover a very logical model of governance. Participatory Authority gives power to the community; Accountable Leadership keeps the ruler in check; Justice-Centered Sovereignty states the purpose of power. Each concept complements the other two: if there is participation without accountability, it is a risk of disorder; accountability without justice is without proper direction; and justice without participation is an imposition. The sermon thus develops a comprehensive political ethic where both ruler and ruled share moral responsibility. In the precarious period after the Prophet's *wisaal*, this pattern was instrumental in maintaining the unity of the community by clearly defining the nature, boundaries, and purpose of caliphal power. Rather than being simply a spontaneous gesture of humility, the speech is a declaration of principled governance, one that sets the course of Islamic political thought for the later generations.

### **Conclusion**

Abu Bakr (RA)'s first sermon is not just a political statement but a significant event in the evolution of Islamic oratory and governance. During a time of major change, the sermon is a great example of how the early Islamic khutbah was used as one of the main tools of the civilization, politically shaping not only the ethical awareness but also the communal identity. Abu Bakr (RA), through his brief yet powerfully structured language, came out with a leadership model that was participation-based authority, peace and justice-centered accountable leadership, and justice-centered sovereignty. These concepts, though not very clear, were rhetorically embedded in the speaker's behavior by constructions through conditional clauses, antithesis, direct address, and moral aphorism.

From the perspective of Arabic oratory, the sermon illustrates the change of the prophetic rhetoric into the institutional discourse. Prophetic sermons were authoritative because they were based on revelation.



This speech, however, represents the leadership after the prophets: the leader may commit errors but is determined and principled; he has the right to rule but also has to give up power. The rhetorical devices used are humility to soften authority, power limiting by conditional wording, and dramatization of justice through parallel structures. So, this way, the sermon proves that early Islamic rhetoric was not a tool for mere communication of the governance but for bringing it into being.

Therefore, Abu Bakr RA's speech might be counted among the first expressions of political ethics in the religion of Islam. It set lasting standards for leadership and at the same time showed how Arabic eloquence can influence political theory by means of attractive moral expression. In connection with the investigation of the early Islamic *Khutbah*, the sermon is a key document where the art of persuasion and government unite to illustrate the ethical framework of the new Islamic state.

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