

EPILOGUE

The attending symbolism—intended or inadvertent—is overpowering. Around 100/718, when the ‘Alīd Abū Hāshim died and the Organization sat on its own independent course, Abū Muslim was about to be born (?) and Naṣr ibn Sayyār was a middle-aged veteran of the Umayyad Establishment—almost as old as the Establishment itself. Three decades later, Naṣr and Abū Muslim collided. The young won, the old lost. Symbolism aside, the period is not measurable by the number of years. And, ‘Abbāsīd apocalypics aside, there were no signs of the momentous upheaval which was to come three decades down the road. But something was brewing. For the historian who arrives after the fact, events have a way of falling into patterns and emerging, in retrospect, in configurations understandably, if not inevitably, leading to the landmark occurrences which crown the chain of these events.

The destruction of the Umayyad regime was not the result of a lengthy process of decay and disintegration. The Revolution broke out into the open only four years after the end of one of the longest and reasonably stable Umayyad reigns. In Khurāsān itself, home of the Revolution, it ended one of the two longest terms in the governorship of the province—a term the first half of which had been marked by stability, flexibility, reform and promise. What signs of turmoil and trouble that might have been apparent earlier indicated nothing more than the usual disturbances—tribal trouble in the inside, and frontier clashes of a localized nature, which had abounded all through the Umayyad period. A mortal blow of existential proportions such as the one they received, inevitable as it might be reckoned in hindsight, was hardly seen coming.

In an ostensibly sudden eruption, the Umayyad Establishment was engaged by an ‘alien’ force. The characters of both forces contributed to the ostensible abruptness of the end. The mortal enemy was a clandestine revolutionary Organization which had been reared and bred in utmost secrecy. This deadly efficient Organization, unseen for a protracted preparatory stage, was only the spearhead and the organizing power which molded, streamlined, drove and led the primal forces of the conquered land.

There had been long-term and deep-rooted factors embedded in the nature of the Umayyad Establishment itself: its power base, elements of perpetuation, institutions, ideology and basis of sovereignty and political

legitimacy. These were not anomalies of the system; they were properties of the organic constitution of the very existence of the Establishment. They were part and parcel of the same regime which had been successful for almost eighty-five years, despite of, but also due to these very same properties. Just as it is with all organic structures, the principle of growth is itself the principle of dissolution—what feeds life feeds death. If conquest is the first principle of imperial existence, the attendant subjugation of the conquered is its inherent mortal defect, and the first principle of its demise. These are the dynamics of the rise and fall of empires.

In the case of the Arab empire, an intriguing element, peculiar to it, added to the velocity and momentum of these universal dynamics, and it put a unique twist on the outcome. The inclusive and egalitarian character of Islam, coupled with its being accepted by wide sectors of the conquered, made a historical paradox of the phenomenon of a conquering Muslim Arab race. Islam is capable of being a conquering religion, but, once accepted by the conquered, it can no longer remain so. The race which conquers in the name of Islam cannot retain both racial supremacy and Islamic legitimacy if the conquered races chose to embrace the religion of the conqueror. History does not tolerate paradoxes for long. For this paradox to be resolved, Arabs would have had to be de-Islamicized, or the Muslim Arab Establishment had to be de-Arabianized. The first alternative was not a possibility; Islam was the source of Arab power and inspiration, and the principle of their legitimacy. As it were, the outcome was merely an end to this first era of the history of Islam. Arabs lost supremacy, but Islam and Arabic continued to prosper. The Establishment, inasmuch as it was an Islamic edifice, was not destroyed, but was taken over and overhauled. It was de-racialized, or more accurately de-Arabianized; its power base and elements of perpetuation were redistributed, more equitably in racial terms, and they were set in harmony with the principles of its own legitimacy. The 'Arab' Muslim kingdom fell, and the inter-racial 'Muslim' empire rose, with Persian overtones.

Some factors of decay that pertain to the Establishment itself did manifest themselves at times in forms of grievances and uprisings, and were mostly dealt with by suppression. At times they were actually recognized as failures of the system and were addressed, inevitably by half measures: sometimes out of piety, sometimes out of political expediency. Yet, they were so inherent in the nature of the realm, that they could not have possibly been conceived of as a mortal threat to its existence. Even when Naṣr ibn Sayyār, ahead of others, saw the gravity of the situation and warned of it, change was not possible. Not only

because it was too late, but because structural metamorphosis does not occur in establishments. An establishment transforming itself into what it is not is a contradiction in terms.

Those factors were the defining structural properties of the Establishment. Under the dynamics of rise and fall, and as a result of the mutual identification between the conquered and the conqueror, and in the midst of an uncontrollable wave of conversion to the equalizing religion, those structural properties degenerated, as a matter of course, into fatal structural flaws. Change could be brought about, as it was, only by a revolution; and the agents of change in such magnitude could never be themselves the beneficiaries of the status quo.

Change from within an incumbent establishment might be attempted by benevolent avant-garde seers; but only by individuals, within certain perimeters and limitations which the individual reformer himself would not seek to overstep. The establishment would resist such of its sons. Such individuals would be caught between the resistance their establishment offers them, the limitations they naturally impose on themselves, and the intransigence of the advocates of real change—agents of an uncompromising revolution which would claim the heads of the ‘heads’ of the realm, not exempting the heads of the reformers. Such individuals are doomed to natural failure; and such was the episode of Naṣr ibn Sayyār and Abū Muslim; namely, the episode of the Umayyad regime and its topplers.