

AL-MA'MUN: AN ESSAY ON HIS ADMINISTRATION POLICIES

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Abstract

Abbasid Caliphate illustrated as peak period of Islamic civilization with the emergence of charismatic and influential caliphs. Al-Ma'mun was one of the influential caliphs who gave new political image through his policies on maintaining his power. Through this study, it will examine the policies implemented by al-Ma'mun on maintaining relationship with two groups of Muslims during his reign, Shiites and Mu'tazilites. The study also looks to the political events took place during al-Ma'mun reign which leads him to change his political means to maintain the position and the usage of religion as a method to manipulate the political agenda. By the end of the study, there will be an analysis on the effectiveness of the al-Ma'mun political strategies implementation.

Background of al-Ma'mun

Abu Jaafar al-Ma'mun ibn Harun was the caliph of the Abbasid Caliphate for 20 years from 813 until 833. He is the son of the Harun al-Rashid and his mother originated from Iranian. He also has a brother, al-Amin who was a result of his father marriage with a woman with royal Arab ancestry. This condition later leads to the civil war between these two brothers when their father demised. Al-Tabari through his writing was described al-Ma'mun as "a man with average height, light complexion, handsome and having long beard losing his dark color as he aged." Al-Ma'mun also was well-known with his generosity, respect the Prophet Muhammad and moderate and justice in actions as well as love poetry (Naved, 2010).

Al-Ma'mun and Al-Amin Civil War

The position of caliph was discussed between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun during their father, Harun al-Rashid still alive. The arrangements public was done by Harun during pilgrimage to Mecca on the position of his sons upon his demise. Al-Amin and al-Ma'mun were took oath in front of Ka'bah that they will fulfill their father wishes. Through this oath, it should be understood that al-Amin will succeed his father's position as a caliph and control Iraq while al-Ma'mun has a responsibility as a governor of Khurasan. Al- Ma'mun also supposedly become the successor of the caliph after his brother, al-Amin. This arrangement has a strong reason when al-Amin has closed relationship with elite in Baghdad while al-Ma'mun has been favoured by the Khurasan people (Bennison, 2009).

The condition of the Abbasid Caliphate ran as agreed by them upon his father's demise. However, there are several reasons which lead both of them to the Abbasid's civil war. Firstly, the influence of minister, Fadl ibn al-Rabi' who was disfavoured over al-Ma'mun and was influenced al-Amin to appoint his own son, Musa as his successor. This condition later leads al-Ma'mun was represented by Tahir, Khurasani's aristocracy launched attack which defeated al-Amin (Bennison, 2009). Secondly, the condition of al-Amin without support from any military force made him weak to counter attacks from al-Ma'mun. This condition due to the military force centred in Khurasan and this given al-Ma'mun more advantages (Fawzi, 2003). Thirdly, Muir (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) described the unwise decision that has been made by al-Rashid by dividing the caliphate and leaved the caliphate under the rule of al-Amin which was a weak and incompetent person. This argument can be supported by Hodgson (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) which illustrated al-Amin as the person that open to manipulation by his minister and his mother which later leads him violated the agreement that has been made.

Due to this civil war, Gabriel (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) mentioned that the war is not a bloody confrontation between supporters of two figures mentioned above but as a result of conflict of intra-Arab and dynastic issue. He also agreed with the role of Fadl ibn al-Rabi' and al-Fadl ibn Sahl as source of conflict between these two brothers. The role of al-Fadl ibn Sahl can be understood after al-Ma'mun took power over the Abbasid Caliphate.

As a result of defeat of al-Amin, al-Fadl ibn Sahl advised al-Ma'mun to rule the government from Merv, Khurasan. This condition gave opportunity for al-Fadl to overshadow the caliph by controlling government affairs and use the name, "Holder of the Two Headships". The power of al-Fadl became stronger when he tried to introduce Persian customs in court proceeding and appointed his brother as governor of Iraq (Fawzi, 2003). The lawless situation that occurred in Baghdad made this city on the observation of neighbouring states. The war occurred between the Khurasani faction in Baghdad and al-Amin's civilian supporters. This condition leads to the anarchy and chaotic condition took place in the Baghdad. This situation took place due to the appointment of Imam Reza as heir of al-Ma'mun and the people of Baghdad allegiance towards Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi. To remove Imam Reza from power, he was poisoned through grapes that he took. As a result, it required al-Ma'mun to reside in Egypt instead of ruling the government from Merv, Khurasan (Naved, 2010).

According to al-Tabari, al-Ma'mun was entered Baghdad on 19th August 819 and he wore green attire instead of black attired as wore by previous caliph (Naved, 2010). The explanation on the preferences on green colours was due to symbolized Islam in a non-partisan way (Bennison, 2009).

Understanding the Policy of al-Ma'mun on Shiites

When discussing the administration of al-Ma'mun, we cannot escape from looking his policy in winning strategies over Shia population. Obviously, among the biggest plan was named Ali al-Rida who was the 8th Imam of Shia as al-Ma'mun successor. However, this strategy was failed when Shiites realized that al-Rida is too old to survive for that position. To overcome the rebellious of Shiites, al-Ma'mun was poisoned al-Rida (Naved, 2010). As a part of his strategy previously before the death of al-Rida, there was engagement of al-Rida and his son with two daughters of Al-Ma'mun. This relationship suggested to tight the relation between Abbas family and 'Alids (Bennison, 2009).

Yucesoy (2002) underlined the five doctrinal terms that imposed by al-Ma'mun to win the heart of Shiites during his reign. Firstly, it should be understood the highlight on the supremacy of Ali compared to the other companions of the Prophet. Secondly, there was the legality of temporary marriage (al-Muta'). Thirdly, the additional word of takbir during the daily prayers was done which is an additional to the word of 'Allahu Akbar'. Fourthly, the public cursing over Muawwiya was allowed. Lastly, the return of the land of Fandak to Fatimah's inheritors was demanded. As a return to this demands, al-Ma'mun was restricted the power of scholars who interpreted matters solely to the Qur'an and this is due to his necessity of his power should not be challenged.

Relationship between Mu'tazilism and al-Ma'mun

During the last year of the reign of al-Ma'mun, he was come out with the policy of making Mu'tazilism as the official religion of the state. This situation is due to the of al-Ma'mun's favoured towards the ideas and rational arguments that made by the Mu'tazilism

scholars. The most dangerous part of al-Ma'mun action was his acceptance of Mu'tazilites idea on the createdness of the Qur'an. The idea on the createdness of the Qur'an was explaining that al-Qur'an was created instead of eternal. They believed this idea because al-Qur'an was collection of letters and sounds created by God and could not be considered as pre-existent since it will make it equal to the attribute of Allah (Fawzi, 2003).

The idea on the createdness of Qur'an is irrelevant with the scholar of hadith opinion since they believed that al-Qur'an is the eternal entity. This later leads to the policy of *mihna* (inquisition). Through this policy, hundreds scholars were examined for their beliefs and any scholars' belief that inconsistent with the Mu'tazilism will be punished. Among the scholar that was imprisoned is the founder of madhab Hanbali, Ahmad ibn Hanbal. He was refuted to answer question either Qur'an was created or not (Bennison, 2009).

Patton (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) considered *mihna* as a conflict of al-Ma'mun rejection of Sunni-orthodoxy and viewed al-Ma'mun as intolerance and rigid individual. On the other side, Makdisi (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) argued that *Mihna* is the struggle between rational scholars, Mu'tazilites that supported by al-Mamun and traditionalist scholars who depend on the transmission of prophetic tradition who are known as Ahl al-Hadith. When the *mihna* was abolished during al-Mutawakkil, it symbolized the victory of hadith scholars over the rational theology.

Gibb (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) mentioned that the implementation of *mihna* considered as the effort to put religion under the authority of state. The idea of Gibb can be supported by the effort of al-Ma'mun to put aside the actual religious teaching and make him as the centre of command. The idea that Qur'an was created is to make Qur'an equivalent to the creation of

human being, therefore, the command of the Qur'an can be put aside since it is not different as the command of human or to be exact the command of caliph at that time.

However, Sourdel (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) considered that the createdness of Qur'an as the last effort of al-Ma'mun to bridge the gap between Sunni and Mu'tazilism. However, this statement can be argued when the policy of mihna still continued until the reign of al-Mutawakil and it involved the suffering of many Islamic scholars. Perhaps, the best argument is as suggested by Watt (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) which mentioned that the conflict resulted as the clash between bureaucratic elites and the religious scholars. Therefore, it can be viewed the steps that made by al-Ma'mun by reconciled the power with Shiites and acceptance of Mu'tazilism as the strategy of maintaining the political power instead of bridging the different ideologies among Muslim population.

Understanding al-Ma'mun Administration Policies

Al-Ma'mun cannot be denied as the one of the prominent caliphs who developed the landscape of education and social in the Abbasid reign. He was developed the translation centre through establishment of Bayt al-Hikmah and encouraged on the discovery of knowledge through debates and translation Greek works (Naved, 2010). However, the focus of this paper is more to understanding the political situation during al-Ma'mun reign and his reaction through his policies on particular issue.

As suggested by Demichelis (2012), al-Ma'mun can be viewed through his rigorous efforts for the centralization of power upon his took over the position in Baghdad. The objectives of his need to strengthen the power in political and religious fields can be divided into two. Firstly, al-Ma'mun aimed for the centralization of power throughout his reign. This aimed can be

viewed through his strict control over the entire bureaucratic. The explanation on the requirement of powerful and strict control is due to avoid anarchy condition as happened during his early reign in Baghdad. To understand his rule, al-Duri (as cited in Yucesoy, 2002) mentioned al-Ma'mun practiced Machiavellian rules in order to secure his position and authority through strategies and propagandas. It can be viewed that he can appointed Ali al-Rida as his successor and later on eliminate this man from being his successor.

Secondly, the objective of his need to strengthen the power in political and religious filed was to demonstrating a capacity to reconcile the *umma* as expression of divine will. From my own perspective, it can be viewed that al-Ma'mun has done a few 'experiments' to show his efforts in reconciling the Muslims. His effort to unite Abbasid family and Shiites was failed due to awareness of Shiites on the incapable of his leader to become the next caliph. This later should be understood that the concept of caliph under al-Ma'mun might be different with concept of imamate that held by the Shiites (Demichelis, 2012). The second effort that has done by al-Ma'mun through make the Mu'tazilism as official religion of the state failed to reconcile the Muslims. This failure is due to the misleading concept that holds by this group of people and also the misuse of al-Ma'mun on the concept of createdness of the Qur'an to justify his authority.

From the overview, it can be analysed that al-Ma'mun reign was shaded by his effort to allocate the religious matters on the state administration. But the question later that might come to argument, how effective the policy that implemented by al-Ma'mun? From my understanding, it can be viewed in a few points. Firstly, al-Ma'mun has successfully centralised the power when he resided in Baghdad and avoided any people to rule on behalf of him. However, al-Ma'mun still facing crisis on the unification of people due to the civil that occurred. Secondly, to understand the political events at that time, religious matters always brought forward to win the

majority support. However, the excessive action that made by al-Ma'mun through implementation of Mu'tazilites ideas was created tension among Muslim population. Overall, I argued that al-Ma'mun able to centralised power through his rigid authority but he remains unable to solve the tension among Islamic groups of ideologies.

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