

Answerability of Rulers and Clergy in Letter 45 of Nahj al-Balagha: Power Under Scrutiny

By: Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

PhD. (USA), NDI, Shahadat al-Aalamiyah (Al Hawzah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shariah)

Musheer: Fed. Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

The Writer is an Attorney at Law and a Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

Published: Daily News; Weekly Mag, Pakistan 05-06-2009

Revised: 2026

Abstract: *This paper examines the normative and institutional meaning of the A'amil (Governor with authority) through the Basra Case involving Uthman b. Hunayf during the outward Khilafah of Amir al-Mumineen Ali b. Abi Talib (as). Using the epistle preserved as Letter 45 in Nahj al-Balaghah, the study treats a seemingly modest act-accepting an invitation to a sumptuous banquet-as an instructive moment in Islamic public ethics. In Ali's framing, the A'amil is neither a proprietor of power nor a social superior, but a trustee whose private choices signal the moral temperature of the state. The paper situates the admonition within early Islamic administrative practice, where Ummal supervised revenue, order, and petition-access in garrison cities such as Basra, an urban hub whose commercial fortunes made officials susceptible to elite patronage. The letter is read as a warning against social capture: when office-holders become habituated to the tables and tastes of the affluent, the poor are excluded, public confidence is eroded, and state resources drift toward ostentation. Particular attention is paid to Moula Ali's critique of selective hospitality, extravagance, and the failure to interrogate the lawful provenance of wealth used for public display. Methodologically, the study combines close textual reading with ethical-legal analysis to show how moral censure becomes administrative control. It argues that the Basra letter functions as a Show-cause Notice: it compels explanation, sets standards of appearance and substance, and manifests the ruler's duty to monitor subordinates even without modern communications. The paper concludes that Moula Ali's precedent supplies a durable governance template for transparency, conflict-of-interest avoidance, and the restoration of dignity to the neglected classes. Beyond personal piety, the rebuke operates as a governance device that disciplines privilege: it signals that proximity to wealth cannot purchase immunity that social choices is a matter of public interest, and that equality before scrutiny is integral to Islamic constitution. The paper contrasts this ethic with later dynastic patterns in which provincial agents behaved as masters rather than servants, using ceremony and coercion to entrench hierarchy. Thus the Basra Case is read as both historical record and normative benchmark for Reform.*

Keywords: A'amil; Basra; Uthman b. Hunayf; Ali b. Abi Talib; Nahj al-Balaghah; accountability; public trust; Bayt al-Maal, anti-extravagance; social equity; conflict of interest.

Historical Background of the A'amil of Basra

In early Islam, an A'amil denoted an appointed public agent entrusted with public dues and public order: collecting Zakat and Khums, administering a province, implementing Adl, and safeguarding the Bayt al-Maal. In the Nabawi period and the era of the Khulufa, the office was anchored in Amanah rather than privilege. The A'amil was expected to remain accessible, decide petitions with fairness, and avoid every form of conduct that might collapse the distinction between service and self-interest. Basra-established as a garrison town and swiftly transformed into a commercial and military nerve-center-became an especially delicate administrative theatre. Wealth accumulated rapidly, factions competed for influence, and public functionaries were exposed to constant temptation: to cultivate elite patrons, to normalize exclusivist circles, and to allow social proximity to power to substitute for accountability. It is within this environment that Amir al-Mumineen Ali ibn Abi Talib (as), upon assuming authority, appointed Uthman b. Hunayf-an Anṣari of Madinah known for probity-as his A'amil in Basra.

Soon thereafter, political volatility culminated in the developments leading to the Battle of al-Jamal (36 AH/656 CE), during which Basra became the focal point of mobilization and rival claims. Against this charged backdrop, the incident of the lavish feast assumes its full significance. It is not a moral anecdote about food; it is a constitutional lesson about the ethics, optics, and social alignment of authority. During the Zahiri Khilafah of Amir al-Mumineen (as), Uthman b. Hunayf accepted an invitation to a reception hosted by a wealthy notable of Basra. When this reached Amir al-Mumineen (as), he demanded an explanation and issued a rebuke preserved in Nahj al-Balaghah. The letter treats an A'amil's social posture as a matter of public consequence. It condemns exclusivist gatherings that elevate the affluent while humiliating the poor, and it requires officials to interrogate the lawful provenance of wealth displayed in ostentation. In substance, it draws a sharp line: a functionary may not lend the state's moral authority to elite spectacle, nor allow his presence to be used as endorsement of inequity. This "Basra Case File" thereby crystallizes an administrative doctrine that remains central to Islamic governance: public authority is judged not only through decrees and revenue, but through vigilance over subordinates and the moral discipline imposed upon those who act in the ruler's name. In this model, the A'amil and his deputies are not Masters of the public but Servants of the public-bound to facilitate public affairs, maintain peace, and uphold the sanctity of the Bayt al-Maal.

The precedent is also categorical in its standard of accountability: personal reputation does not dilute scrutiny, and rank does not purchase exemption. Indeed, it is precisely the nobility of the office-bearer that demands stricter self-restraint. The misfortune of the Ummah, however, is that later dynastic tendencies-seen under the Umayyads, Abbasids, Ayyubids, Ottomans and other likeminded tyrant empires-often normalized subjugation, elite capture, and hypocrisy: rulers preached restraint while practicing accumulation, advised justice while sustaining inequity, and demanded obedience while abandoning Amanah. The enduring lesson remains plain. The A'amil is a Servant, not a Master; and where he errs, silence is complicity. It is the duty of the educated to identify wrongdoing, insist upon accountability, and resist the

transformation of public office into private entitlement-so that governance returns to its first principles: Adl, Amanah, and fidelity to the Bayt al-Maal.

Ali (as) didn't ignore negligence of any A'amil:

During the time of Ali (as), facilities like e-mail, social media and cell phone were beyond the reach of human imagination. Despite that, Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) established a network of communication in a manner that if any of his A'amil's blundered, he would get to know of it. Ali (as) charged his A'amil in the following letter:

"O Son of Hunayf! I have heard that one of the richest in Basra invited you to a feast and you leapt towards it and participated in it".

At some places one may be forced to go in order to maintain social contacts, while at others he goes according to his will. Ali (as) taught simple living along with upholding high moral values which has disappeared now days. He extended his disapproval in the following words:

"Varieties of food and numerous dishes were served to you".

It is common that lavish food is served in the feast of the rich and usually people flock to enjoy the many sumptuous dishes. At least ten different kinds of dishes are always available in such feasts where every guest eats three or four morsels from each dish, and the rest of the food is thrown away. It is "Isr'af" (extravagance) and "Tabzir" (wasting wealth) in the lexicon of the Qur'an, which is a Har'am practice. There are many hungry people who are deprived of even a single morsel and go to sleep without food.

Moula Ali al-Murtada (as) charged his A'amil:

"I never thought that you would accept the (invitation of the) feast of an arrogant person who is ostentatious and turns away the poor and invites only the rich".

Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) taught his A'amil that a feast in which only the rich are invited humiliates humanity. Ali warned and showed his displeasure that being his A'amil how dare he attend such a feast. A message is communicated through this letter that one should not exclude the underprivileged in any feast. Class discrimination is prohibited in Islam unlike other religion.

Clerics consider it their religious duty to impose their ideas on matters beyond their intellect when they should be focusing on those that are within their control such as the manners of eating according to the Sunnah. The etiquettes of eating are largely discussed in Sirah Literature but it is unfortunate that Muslims ignore the Sunnah during eating. The gluttonous nature exhibited by the people attending a feast has to be remedied. It is necessary that Ulama should draw attention towards this forgotten Sunnah of eating. A Hadith says:

"Eat with respect, as if you being a subordinate are sitting before your Lord".

Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) charges:

"Look at the morsels you take, leave out that about which you are in doubt and take that about which you are sure that it has been secured lawfully".

The magnanimous Khalifah of the Muslims educated that it should be ascertained that the funds spent on such a feast originate from a legal source.

Amir al-Mumineen (as) further says:

If you are doubtful about the source by which the feast has been arranged, do not attend or eat, but find this out first. If you know that the food has been prepared from an illegal income, don't consume it. Food prepared by Har'am means remains in your body and would assume the spirit of Shait'an. The Qur'an says:

"O people! Eat legal and pious food and the food prepared from lawful means, and do not tread the path of Shait'an".

How can something Har'am turn into a Halal one by the mere recitation of "Bismillah" over it? If a Har'am morsel is swallowed, Shait'an would take hold in the body. Taqwa should always be kept in consumption of food because food is like a seed through which the body develops, either with a divine or evil influence. Shait'an is in every doubtful morsel. Therefore, anybody who eats such food would allow the entry of Shait'an in the body. What is even more shocking is that Ulama also ignore the music being played at the time of eating food. This practice is not only reprehensible but forbidden. Enjoying lavish food as a routine and quoting Ali (as) is contradictory in approach.

Amir al-Mumineen Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) says:

"Remember that every follower has a leader whom he follows and from the effulgence of whose knowledge he takes light".

Examples need to be set by the upper strata of society so that people may emulate them. It is the duty of the influential to practically set example of high thinking and simple living, which caters towards progress and prosperity of the society.

The elites of today with their wealth seek to illustrate their influence and close bond with the ruling politicians, tycoons, top bureaucrats, judges amongst others by inviting them to their functions which are an embodiment of pomp and display. Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) says:

"Realize that your Imam has pleased himself with two shabby pieces of cloth out of the (comfort of the) world and two loaves for his meal."

Two breads of barley with salty water, instead of curry, was the usual food of Ali, and after every forty days he consumed a small quantity of meat, as instructed by Rasulullah(S). "Saheb al-Shariah", Rasulullah(S) disliked the daily use of meat. Moreover, Ali (as) used to dress simple while we always run for imported and branded clothes. Ali (as) discarded his clothes only when no space was left for a patch. Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) argued:

"Certainly it is beyond your strength, you cannot do so, but at least support me in piety, exertion, chastity and uprightness because by Allah I have not treasured any gold out of your world nor amassed plentiful wealth nor collected any clothes other than the two shabby sheets".

(Letter 45, "Nahj al-Balaghah", p. 392, vol. ii, Qum, Iran)

Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) knew well that only a few can follow him in Taqwa, therefore, said in clear terms that it is beyond your power to spend your life like Ali (as). Just imagine, as Khalifah of the time, the entire Bait al-Mal was in possession of Moula Ali (as) but he did not construct a Qasar or Mahal for his residence nor he showed any interest in lavish receptions. If you don't practice what Moula Ali (as) taught it means your devotion is like people of Kufa, upon whom

Moula Ali (as), Moula al-Hasan (as), Moula Ali Zayn al-Abideen (as), and Sayyidah Zaynab (as) recited Laanah loud in gatherings.

Ali (as) instructed clearly:

“Step forward and help me. Fear Allah and do not commit acts which are Har’am. Qana’at on your legal earning; don’t take money from illegal means; help people; don’t ask them to come again and again as every person is busy. It is Zulm on that person who has to visit the office of establishment and “Holder of Authority”, and instruct the needy to visit on such and such day, and to keep Taqwa - fear of Allah”.

Lesson from the Show Cause Notice of Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as):

In the above mentioned letter, there is clear direction of the Shariah to all the responsible and concerned that they must maintain equality without making any class distinction amongst people. The leaders residing in palatial bungalows under security should ponder this reality that Islam is not confined to deliver sermons and lectures from high pedestals alone; it demands practical action. The Talim of the above “Charge sheet” and “Show Cause Notice” to the A’amil, issued by Amir al-Mumineen is this that A’amil (a term applicable for the entire government administration) should adopt piety, simplicity and equality. They should not spoil the money of the Ummah for their lust and luxury. This is something to practice in which the secret of society’s welfare is hidden.

Uthman or other Aamils were loyal Ashab of Moula Amir al-Mumineen Ali Ibn Abi Talib (as). However, when Moula felt that they had committed even a minor error (like attending the lavish dinner of a rich man by Uthman) Moula Ali (a) warned them of the viciousness of such an action. After glorifying Allah and praising Rasulullah (S) be it known to you that I am informed that some native of Madinah are leaving you covertly and surreptitiously to join the hordes of the Ruler of Syria. Do not feel regret for those who have left you and have thus refused you their help and assistance. Their turning of faces away from Allah and His Guidance and of stealthily walking over to sin and vice is enough proof of their apostasy and schism and enough reason for you to be thankful for good riddance of bad rubbish.

Materialistic minded are drawn towards the vicious world and are running fast after it. They have heard - from the Qur’an, Rasulullah (S) and Moula Ali (as) - what equity and justice mean, they have seen a just and equitable rule; they have recognized the implications of these principles and they have fully realized how the use of these principles will bring them in level with the commonest and poorest person of the country and how they will be treated like every other human being. Therefore, they are rushing towards a society where Fasad (corruption) is at premium, where favoritism and nepotism holds sway and where justice and equity are abhorred. I swear by Allah that these people are not running away from injustice, inequity, oppression or tyranny, nor are they attaching themselves to truth, justice, equity and fair-play. I pray to Allah to ease the difficulties and remove the obstacles this exodus has created and make our work easy for us, A’ameen

Conclusion:

The lesson from this Letter is that Islamic governance, as articulated by Ali (as), is not content with rhetorical justice; it constitutionalizes accountability through scrutiny of conduct that seems socially ordinary but institutionally corrosive. A feast becomes evidence, because it discloses allegiance: who is welcomed, who is excluded, and which class an official unconsciously serves. The rebuke of Uthman b. Hunayf despite his general nobility-establishes the rule that integrity is not presumed by status, companionship, or prior service; it is continuously tested. This precedent directly confronts the recurring disease of Muslim political history: the transformation of public servants into masters, sustained by pomp, coercion, and sentimental religiosity. Amir al-Mumineen Ali's model dismantles that tendency at its roots by (i) insisting on equality of access, (ii) forbidding class-signaling through selective hospitality, (iii) demanding that public officials remain alert to unlawful wealth and extravagance, and (iv) making oversight an affirmative duty of leadership. For contemporary governance, the Basra Case reads like a principled compliance framework: avoid conflicts of interest, refuse elite capture, maintain modest living, and treat public money and public time as sacred trusts. Its sharpest critical edge is this: when rulers and their agents normalize luxury and distance, they do not merely commit personal lapses; they re-engineer the state into a hierarchy of contempt. The remedy is equally clear-piety in office, simplicity in lifestyle, and rigorous accountability, so that authority returns to its proper meaning: service, not supremacy.

*O Amir al-Mumineen! You ordered for Maruf and refrain from Munkar
Salaam upon you! The concept of accountability of the Qur'an was established by you
Salaam upon you! You did not ignore corrupts, whosoever they may be
O Allah! Grant us Tawfiq to eliminate Fas'ad (corruption) wherever we find it
The Talim of Ali (as) is to demonstrate courage in fighting against any powerful*

Note: Effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, I will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity. This document may be used, only with this copyright notice included. Permission is granted to circulate among private individuals and groups, to post on internet forums, and include in not-for-profit publications subject to the following conditions: (1) Material used must be produced faithfully in full, without alteration or omission; (2) The author's subject title must remain unchanged, in whole or in part; (3) Material must be attributed to the author. Contact the author for all other rights, which are reserved. **Copyright © 2026 Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed**