The Kharijis of North Africa

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For many centuries, the Khawarij were able to maintain a strong foothold in North Africa, establishing long-lasting and powerful dynasties such as the Midrarids and the Rustamids. But why were they able to successfully thrive in the Maghrib, despite not being able to establish a significant presence in the central lands of the Islamic world? As will be shown in this essay, Kharijism was able to establish itself in that region of the Islamic world because of a combination of religio-political discontent with the ruling classes, as well as Khariji doctrine's appeal to the ethos of the Berbers. Once the impact of these two factors was mitigated from the tenth century onwards, Kharijism's influence in the Maghrib waned, as the rationale for adopting it in the first place was lost.

First, it is necessary to describe what Kharijism is and where it originated. The origins of the Khariji sect can be traced to the Battle of Siffin in 657 between the forces of Ali b. Abi Talib and Muʿawiya. A faction from among Ali's men rejected his decision to seek arbitration between himself and Muʿawiya, and thus defected from his army. Thus they became known as the Khawarij (from the word *kharaja*, meaning "to secede"). In their view, to seek arbitration between the two sides was illegitimate because to do so would involve giving credence to Muʿawiya. One Khariji was said to have stated the famous slogan, "There is no judgment except that of God" (*la hukm illa lillah*).[1] Ali responded to this secession by killing several of the Khawarij in the battle of Nahrawan in 658. He then continued to repress them until one of their number, a man by the name

[1] Paul M. Love, Jr. "The Sufris of Sijilmasa: Toward a History of the Midrarids," *The Journal of North Africa Studies* 15.2 (June 2010): 174

of Ibn Muljam, assassinated him, as revenge for the deaths of his relatives at the hands of Ali's men.[2]

From this event came the main distinctive tenet of Kharijism, which is their doctrine of sin. The Khawarij believe that sin is a sign that a Muslim has apostatized inwardly, and that if a leader of the Muslim community lapses into sin, then they must fight against him to overthrow him. Having rejected both Ali and the Umayyads as legitimate rulers of the Muslim people, this also led to a more egalitarian view of leadership. In contrast with the Sunnis, who believe that a caliph must be chosen from among the Quraysh, and with the Shi'as, who more specifically demand that the leader of the Muslims must be of the lineage of Ali, the Kharijis believe that any competent member of the Muslim community can become a leader, regardless of their descent.[3] This would prove to be important later on as Islam spreads to non-Arab ethnic groups such as the Berbers.

After the assassination of Ali, the Khariji sect continued to remain, but having been repressed in the main centres of Islamic power, fled to the hinterlands of the Islamic empire such as Eastern Arabia and North Africa, where Kharijism was adopted eagerly by the Berbers and various dissident groups operating in those regions. During the eighth century, the Ibadi sect of Khawarij revolt against the Abbasid dynasty and establish an independent state in what is now Algeria under the influence of the Persian Khariji ʿAbd ar-Rahmān ibn Rustam, whom they proclaimed as their imam. The Rustamid dynasty established its capital in Tahert (or Tiaret), where they ruled for a

[2] M. Elfasi and I. Hrbek, *General History of Africa, Volume III: Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000), 43. See also Cyril Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 255-256.
[3] Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam,* 256-257.

century and a half until the Fatimids came into the region and overthrew them in 909, bringing an end to the Khariji domination of Algeria.[4]

At around the same time, the Banu Midrar, who adhered to the Sufri sect, established a dynasty further to the west in Morocco, with its capital in Sijilmassa. Documentation of politics, religion and life in the Midrarid state is made complicated by the fact that none of the writings produced by them survive, so we know about them primarily through external sources.[5] From what can be known about them, it would appear that Sijilmassa became the cosmopolitan hub of the western Maghrib in its day, with inhabitants from different parts of the Muslim world residing there, including many Arabs from the east who have taken refuge there. The city flourished because it was the main trading post in the commercial trade route from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Islamic world.[6] The independence of the Midrarids came to an end in 909, when the Isma'ili mahdi, 'Ubdayd Allah, and his son, Abu'l-Qasim, were found in Sijilmassa and captured. They were rescued by the Fatimid army, led by the general Abu 'Abdallah, who then annexed Sijilmassa. They allowed the Midrarids to continue ruling over the city, until the death of the last Midrarid ruler, Abu Muhammad 'Abdallah, in 976.[7]

In addition to the Ibadis and Sufris, two other Khariji sects, the Azariqa and the Najdiyya, inhabited North Africa during the eighth and ninth centuries and were a source of tension in the region. Unlike the former two sects, however, these more radical sects did not exercise any political power, since their radicalism in rejecting and killing all whom they deemed unworthy made them too unstable in their leadership. They

[4] Phillip C. Naylor, *North Africa: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 69, 72-73.
[5] Love, "The Sufris of Sijilmasa," 176-177.
[6] Ibid., 178.
[7] Ibid., 181-183.

quickly died out, leaving the Ibadis and the Sufris as the sole representatives of Kharijism in the region.[8]

One of the main reasons why Kharijism was able to exert a great deal of influence amongst the people of North Africa was because it appealed to the Independent-mindedness and puritanical religious ethic of the Berbers.[9] Historian Robert Hillenbrand, for example, points to Kharijism's "ethical intransigence, its concern with authority and legitimacy, and its care to define the respective value of faith and works," as the key values which endeared it to the Berbers, and likens it to the Donatist heresy which dominated Christian North Africa during the fourth and fifth centuries.[10]

The Egalitarianism of Kharijism was a factor in its acceptance by the Berbers as well. Its belief that any pious Muslim could become a leader of the Muslim community resonated with them because it provided them with a theological justification for their resistance against Arab invaders. Thus, Khariji doctrine was used by various Berber groups as an ideological rally for rebellions against them.[11]

In addition, once the Khariji states were set up, they became a haven for Khawarij from other sectors of the Islamic world, as evidenced by the cosmopolitan nature of the Midrarid state. Sijilmassa's position as a trading post also contributed to its prosperity, giving it a longevity that few other independent Islamic kingdoms enjoyed.[12]

That being said, once the factors mentioned ceased to be significant, the influence of Kharijism in the Maghreb began to wane. The ascendance of the Maliki school of fiqh among Sunni Muslims in North Africa and Spain provided a formidable challenge to

[8] Ibid., 174
[9] M. Elfasi and I. Hrbek, *General History of Africa, Volume III, 249-250.*
[10] Naylor, *North Africa,* 68-69.
[11] Love, "The Sufris of Sijilmasa," 174.
[12] Ibid., 178.

Kharijism, as Maliki Sunnism did battle against it and the various heterodox Muslim sects from the eighth century onwards.[13] The real downfall of Kharijism came, however, with the Fatimid invasions of the tenth century, which swept the Rustamids and Midrarids off the map. There were occasional attempts to regain control, such as a Khariji revolt against the Fatimids in 945 led by one Abu Yazid.[14] This proved to be short-lived however, and its defeat, as well as the subsequent conversion of the Fatimids' Midrarid vassal Muhammad bin al-Fath to Maliki Sunnism meant that Kharijism ceased to be a political force in North Africa.[15]

It can be seen then that Kharijism was able to spread in North Africa because it provided the Muslim converts there with an attractive alternative to the more "orthodox" Sunni and Shi'a forms of Islam, and was more palatable to the ethno-religious ethos of the Berbers. However, Kharijism ultimately proved to have a short shelf life. All the Khariji sects have since gone extinct, except for the Ibadis. Although Ibadism continues to exist in the Maghreb to this day, they've ceased to have the kind of influence that they held during the eighth to early tenth centuries under the Rustamids, being limited to a few communities scattered in different parts of North Africa. And with the fall of the Shi'i Fatimid dynasty, Maliki Sunnism ultimately prevailed, establishing the status quo for Islamic North Africa that exists to this present day.

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[13] Hugh N. Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of al-Andalus* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), 40-41. For a more detailed account of how Maliki Sunnism established itself in North Africa against Kharijism, see Mansour Hasan Mansour, *The Maliki School of Law: Spread and Domination in North and West Africa, 8th-14th Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Austin & Winfield, 1995).

[14] Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 95-96.

[15] Love, "The Sufris of Sijilmasa," 182.

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