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Nepotism and Rebellion in the Era of Usman bin Affan: A Historical Analysis of the Dynamics of Politics, Administration, and the Factors Causing the Leadership Crisis

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Abstract

The reign of Usman ibn Affan (644–656 CE) was a crucial period in the history of the Rashidun Caliphate, marked by accusations of nepotism and rebellion. This study aims to analyze the political and administrative dynamics of Usman's government and the factors causing his leadership crisis. This study uses a qualitative historical method with a critical historiographical approach through the study of classical sources and contemporary historical literature. The results show that the appointment of a number of relatives to government positions triggered political dissatisfaction, which was also influenced by economic factors, ethnicity, and weak political communication. This study concludes that Usman's leadership crisis was not solely caused by nepotism, but also by the complexity of governance and conflicts of interest. This study provides lessons on the importance of meritocracy, transparency, accountability, and conflict management in leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (11–40 AH/632–661 CE) occupies a central position in Islamic historiography as the most ideal era of leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic and Western historians agree that the era of the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali, laid the foundation for the formation of the political, administrative, and civilizing structures of Islam as a whole (Lubis et al., 2025). However, among the four caliphs, the reign of Usman bin Affan (24–35 AH/644–656 AD) displays the most controversial and most debated characteristics in historical literature.

Usman bin Affan was elected as the third caliph through a mechanism of shura (consultative council) which was formed by his predecessor, Umar bin Khattab, before he died (Yani & Fattah, 2023). As a senior friend who falls into the category of al-sabiqun al-awwalun(the first people to convert to Islam), Usman had high religious credibility (Masykuroh, 2025).

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He was one of the companions who was guaranteed entry into heaven (al-'asyarah al-mubashsharah), married two of the Prophet's daughters, Rukayyah and Umm Kulsum, so he was nicknamed Dzu al-Nurayn (the owner of two lights), and was known as a generous, gentle, and simple person (Nurmaini, 2025).

However, despite these personal virtues, Usman's reign was marked by significant controversy. His twelve-year caliphate was divided into two distinct periods: the first six years (24–30 AH) were relatively stable and productive, while the last six years (30–35 AH) were marked by political discontent, accusations of nepotism, mass protests, and culminating in a rebellion that ended with the caliph's assassination in his own residence in 35 AH (Chaniago et al., 2026).

The biggest controversy surrounding Usman's reign is the accusation that he implemented a policy of nepotism, namely appointing his relatives from the Umayyad dynasty to strategic positions in the government. Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan was appointed governor of all of Syria, Abdullah ibn Sa'd ibn Abi Sarh was appointed governor of Egypt, Marwan ibn al-Hakam was appointed secretary of state, al-Walid ibn Uqbah was appointed governor of Kufa, and Abdullah ibn Amir was appointed governor of Basrah. This policy sparked a wave of criticism from various groups, including senior companions, members of other tribes who felt marginalized, and the qurra' (Quran readers) who were dissatisfied with Usman's fiscal policies (Nugroho, 2026).

These accusations of nepotism became a central issue that sparked the rebellion against Usman. Groups from Kufa, Basrah, and Egypt traveled to Medina to protest and demand policy changes (Rido'i, 2026). The initially persuasive protests turned violent when demonstrators surrounded Usman's house for several days and finally succeeded in killing him on June 17, 656 AD (Capah, 2024). This event not only ended Usman's reign, but also became the starting point of the Fitnah Kubra (First Civil War), which divided the Muslims.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to critically and objectively understand one of the most fundamental events in early Islamic history. The accusation of nepotism against Usman was not merely a moral issue, but rather a question related to the transformation of the government system from a consensus-based communal leadership model to a more bureaucratic and centralized state model. In other words, the controversy surrounding Usman's policies reflects the transitional crisis experienced by Muslim societies in responding to the changing scale and complexity of governance.

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. First, this research conducts a critical historiographical analysis that systematically compares the views of classical historians (al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, al-Baladzuri, al-Ya'qubi) with the studies of contemporary historians (Madelung, Kennedy, Donner, Hodgson) to uncover the social construction behind the accusations of nepotism. Second, this research does not simply repeat the conventional narrative of Usman's nepotism, but places the policy of appointing relatives within the context of 7th-century Arab political culture, which was still heavily influenced by tribal ties ('ashabiyyah) and patronage systems. Third, this research uses an interdisciplinary approach that integrates political theory, social conflict theory, and the concept of good governance to analyze the factors causing the rebellion more comprehensively.

The research gap underlying this study is the limited number of studies that critically analyze the accusations of nepotism against Usman, taking into account the social, political, and cultural context of the period. Many studies tend to take either an apologetic stance (defending Usman by rejecting accusations of nepotism) or a polemical stance (considering Usman as a corrupt caliph). This study attempts to bridge these two poles with a more objective, evidence-based approach.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative research method with a historical approach. This approach was chosen because the object of study is a past event that requires reconstruction based on available historical sources.

This research is a library study, which relies on written sources as primary data. These sources include:

The data collection technique was carried out through a systematic literature search (heuristic) in libraries and academic databases (Google Scholar, Garuda, DOAJ, Scopus). The keywords used include: "Usman bin Affan", "nepotism", "rebellion", "Khulafaur Rasyidin", "Fitnah Kubra", "Usman ibn Affan", "nepotism", "rebellion".

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political and Administrative Conditions of the Government of Usman bin Affan

Usman ibn Affan inherited a system of government solidly built by his two predecessors. Abu Bakr laid the foundation for Muslim unity by crushing the apostate movement (Haerunnisa et al., 2025). Umar bin Khattab developed a well-organized administrative system, including the establishment of a diwan (record-keeping institution), the division of provinces (amsar), and the establishment of a salary system for officials and soldiers (Manggarani et al., 2025). By the time Usman came to power at the age of around 70, Islamic rule had expanded to encompass the Arabian Peninsula, Syria (Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine), Iraq, Persia, Egypt, and parts of North Africa. Such a vast territory required an effective administrative system to manage the various provinces, each with its own distinct social, economic, and cultural characteristics (Masykur & Suhendar, 2025). Usman continued the expansionist policy pioneered by Umar. During his reign, Islamic forces conquered the Caucasus, Cyprus, and much of North Africa. However, this expansion also brought new challenges: managing revenues from new territories, managing relations with non-Muslim populations, and the increasingly complex distribution of spoils of war (Chaniago et al., 2026). In terms of government structure, Usman maintained the provincial system established by Umar. The main provinces of Medina (the capital), Mecca, Syria, Kufa, Basrah, Egypt, and Persia were each headed by a governor (amir or wali) who was directly responsible to the caliph. In addition, there were other officials such as the secretary of state (katib), the treasurer (sahib al-bayt al-mal), and the judge (qadi) (Khalid et al., 2024). Baitul Mal as a state financial institution experienced significant development during the Usman era. State revenue came from various sources: zakat, jizyah (tax on non-Muslims), kharaj (land tax), and ghanimah (spoils of war) (Putra, 2025). Usman made several changes in the management of the Baitul Mal, including policies that were later criticized as nepotism. During the first six years of his reign (24–30 AH), political conditions were relatively stable. Usman succeeded in maintaining the unity of the Muslim community and continued territorial expansion. However, in the final six years (30–35 AH), various signs of instability emerged. Criticism of Usman's policies began to surface, protests from various provinces grew louder, and eventually erupted into open rebellion (Puspitasari, 2025).

Relative Adoption Policy

One of Usman's most controversial policies was the appointment of his Umayyad relatives to strategic positions. Here's an analysis of some of Usman's key appointees:

Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan

Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan was appointed governor of Syria by Umar ibn

Khattab in 18 AH, and Usman retained him and even expanded his authority to include the governorship of all of Syria. Muawiyah was Usman's cousin and belonged to the same Umayyad clan (Nofrianti et al., 2024). In terms of competence, Muawiyah proved to be a highly capable administrator. He managed Syria, a strategic province prone to conflict with Rome, very effectively. He built a navy that later defeated the Roman fleet in a crucial battle. He was also known as a shrewd politician and a skilled diplomat. Criticism of Muawiyah's appointment arose for several reasons: first, Muawiyah was the son of Abu Sufyan, one of the Prophet's greatest enemies before his conversion to Islam; second, there was concern that Muawiyah's excessive power in Syria would create a new dynasty within the Islamic government (Ash-Shiddieqy, 2025).

Abdullah bin Sa'ad bin Abi Sarh

Abdullah bin Sa'ad bin Abi Sarh was appointed governor of Egypt. He was the half-brother of Usman and had previously been one of the writers of the Prophet's revelations before apostatizing and then re-converting to Islam (Hadiono, 2023). In terms of competence, Abdullah ibn Sa'd proved to be a formidable warlord. He led the conquest of North Africa and successfully defeated the Roman-Byzantine forces. However, criticism arose due to his apostasy and family ties to Usman (Dalimunthe, 2024).

Marwan bin al-Hakam

Marwan ibn al-Hakam was appointed Secretary of State by Usman. Marwan was Usman's cousin and brother-in-law, and later became Caliph during the Umayyad dynasty (684–685 CE). In terms of competence, Marwan was known as an intelligent figure, an expert in state administration, and possessed integrity as an official. He was instrumental in establishing the instruments of measurement and weights and was known as an expert in reading the Quran and narrating hadith. However, criticism of Marwan was sharp because he was considered the éminence grise behind Usman's throne. Many historical sources state that it was Marwan who actually controlled the government, especially during the final years of Usman's life (Rantau & Putra, 2025).

Al-Walid bin Uqbah

Al-Walid ibn Uqbah was appointed governor of Kufa. He was Usman's nephew. However, his appointment was highly controversial, as al-Walid was known for his heavy drinking and was even flogged by Umar for this. Despite this, some sources state that al-Walid repented and improved after being appointed governor. However, his bad reputation remained a burden on Usman's administration (Hambaliana & Nurulloh, 2022).

Abdullah bin Amir

Abdullah ibn Amir was appointed governor of Basrah. He was Usman's maternal brother and was known as a competent leader. He successfully led the expansion into Persia and expanded Islamic rule in the east (Hidayat et al., 2025). Criticism of Abdullah bin Amir's appointment arose because he was very young when appointed as governor, so he was considered inexperienced.

Historical Analysis: From the five figures mentioned above, it can be seen that Usman did not simply appoint his relatives without considering their competence. Most of them possessed the necessary skills and experience to hold the positions they were given. However, several issues made this policy controversial.

First, the number of relatives appointed by Usman was much larger than that of his predecessor. Umar also appointed some relatives, but not as many as Usman. Second, some of the figures appointed had a bad reputation (such as al-Walid ibn Uqbah) or controversial backgrounds (such as Abdullah ibn Sa'ad, who had apostatized). Third, the appointment of Usman's relatives created the perception that the Umayyad clan, which had previously been hostile to the Prophet, was returning

to power through the back door. Fourth, this policy ignored the rights of the Muhajirin and Ansar groups who had contributed to the early struggle for Islam (Masykuroh, 2025).

Factors Causing the Rebellion

The rebellion against Usman was not an event caused by a single factor, but by the accumulation of various interrelated factors.

Political Factors: The most significant political factor was the perception that Usman had shifted the system of government from a consultative (shura) model to a monarchical one centralized in the hands of the Umayyads. Senior Companions felt that their rights to be involved in decision-making had been neglected. Furthermore, the appointment of Usman's relatives to strategic positions was seen as an attempt to establish a new dynasty within the Islamic government (Ramzar et al., 2025). Social Factors: Social factors were related to tensions between groups within Islamic society. The Muhajirin (immigrants from Mecca) and Ansar (native inhabitants of Medina), who had contributed to the early struggle for Islam, felt marginalized by the dominance of the Umayyads. Furthermore, other tribes unrelated to the Umayyads also felt they were not receiving fair access to power and resources (Roihan & Zen, 2026).

Economic Factors: Economic factors relate to the policy of distributing state assets (Baitul Mal). Usman was criticized for giving a larger share to his relatives than to other groups. Furthermore, Usman's fiscal policies, including the management of conquered lands and the distribution of spoils, were considered unfair by some groups, particularly the qurra' (Quran readers), who felt their rights were being violated (Pasaribu et al., 2024).

Tribal Factor: The tribal factor cannot be separated from this analysis. 7th-century Arab society was still very much tied to tribal solidarity ('ashabiyyah). The appointment of Usman's relatives from the Umayyads was considered a form of favoritism towards a particular clan, which was contrary to the spirit of Islamic brotherhood (ukhuwwah) taught by the Prophet.

Administrative Factors: Administrative factors relate to weakened oversight of officials. During Umar's reign, oversight of governors was very strict, and Umar did not hesitate to dismiss officials who committed irregularities. During Usman's reign, oversight became looser, and several governors, particularly those from Usman's family, were reported to have committed arbitrary acts (Kamila & Sudjatnika, 2025).

Political Communication Factors: An often overlooked but crucial factor is the failure of political communication. Usman failed to effectively communicate his policies to the public. His critics successfully constructed a narrative that Usman was a corrupt and nepotistic caliph, while Usman himself was unable to convincingly refute these accusations (Yulyanti et al., 2025).

Information and Propaganda Dissemination Factor: This factor was very significant in the escalation of the conflict. According to several sources, a figure named Abdullah ibn Saba, who later became known as a controversial figure in Islamic historiography, played a role in spreading anti-Usman propaganda in various provinces. Although Abdullah ibn Saba's historical existence is still debated, what is clear is that anti-Usman propaganda successfully mobilized masses from Kufa, Basrah, and Egypt to protest in Medina.

Elite Interest Factors: The rebellion against Usman was also driven by the interests of certain elites who felt their interests were threatened by Usman's policies. Several senior companions who had previously supported Usman, such as Talha, Zubair, and even the Prophet's wife, Aisha, eventually joined the opposition.

Interrelationships: All of the above factors are interrelated and reinforce each other. Economic dissatisfaction fueled political discontent; social tensions intensified

anti-Umayyad sentiment; political communication failures made accusations of nepotism more convincing; and propaganda from certain interest groups successfully transformed discontent into an organized rebellion (Fitrie et al., 2025).

Chronology of the Rebellion

Early Protests (c. 30–34 AH): Protests against Usman began to emerge midway through his reign. Initially, the criticism was individual and limited, but it became more widespread over time. Some senior companions, such as Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, openly criticized Usman's policies and were eventually exiled to al-Rabadhah (Chaniago et al., 2026).

Events in Kufa (34 AH): Kufa became the main center of the rebellion. The people of Kufa, most of whom were former soldiers and Qurra', were very dissatisfied with Usman's policies. They sent a delegation to Medina to convey their protest (Rido'i, 2026).

Events in Basrah (34 AH): Basrah also became a center of resistance. Abdullah bin Amir, the governor of Basrah and Usman's relative, faced fierce resistance from the local population.

Events in Egypt (34–35 AH): Egypt became the most radical province in the opposition movement. The Egyptians sent a delegation to Medina with more stringent demands than in other provinces.

Delegation to Medina (35 AH): In 35 AH, delegations from Kufa, Basrah, and Egypt arrived in Medina to meet with Usman. They presented various demands, including the removal of unpopular governors and changes in fiscal policy.

Siege of Usman's House (35 AH): When their demands were not met, the protesters surrounded Usman's house in Medina. The siege lasted for several days, and Usman was besieged along with his family.

Conflict Resolution Efforts: Various attempts were made to resolve the conflict peacefully. Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, attempted to mediate between Usman and the demonstrators. However, these efforts failed due to heightened tensions.

Death of Usman ibn Affan (June 17, 656 CE/35 AH): On June 17, 656 CE, demonstrators broke into Usman's house and killed him while he was reciting the Quran. This event marked the end of Usman's reign and the beginning of a new era in Islamic history.

Critical Analysis

Was nepotism really happening? The answer to this question depends on the definition of nepotism used. If nepotism is defined as "the appointment of relatives to important positions without considering their competence," then the accusation of nepotism against Usman is difficult to prove. Most of the relatives appointed by Usman were indeed competent. However, if nepotism is defined as "the dominant appointment of relatives without providing fair opportunities to other groups," then the accusation has strong grounds. Usman indeed appointed a far greater number of relatives than his predecessors.

Was this policy appropriate for the 7th-century context? In 7th-century Arab culture, the promotion of relatives was not unusual. The tribal system (qabail) placed a high value on family loyalty, and the promotion of relatives to important positions was seen as a way to ensure loyalty and stability. However, what made Usman's policy controversial was that Islam, with its egalitarian ideals, was supposed to transcend tribal ties. In this regard, Usman failed to balance the demands of political reality with Islamic ideals.

How did Arab political culture at the time influence appointment decisions? Arab political culture in the 7th century was heavily influenced by tribal ties and

patronage systems. In such systems, family loyalty was considered a positive, not a negative, value. Usman, as an Umayyad, grew up in a culture where appointing relatives was a normal practice. However, when this practice was applied within the ideally egalitarian context of Islamic governance, it became controversial.

Are the accusations of nepotism supported by strong historical evidence? The historical evidence for the accusations of nepotism against Usman is quite strong, but it needs to be read critically. Primary sources such as al-Tabari and al-Baladzuri do record accusations of nepotism against Usman. However, these sources also record Usman's defense. In other words, the accusations of nepotism against Usman are not indisputable facts, but rather a social construct constructed by opposition groups to legitimize their rebellion.

Overall, a critical analysis shows that the accusations of nepotism against Usman cannot be understood in a simple manner. There is some truth to the accusation (Usman did appoint his relatives), but there is also context to consider (Arab political culture, the need for stability, and the competence of the relatives appointed). Oversimplifying this event as "nepotism" or "not nepotism" is an unfair approach to the complexity of history.

Relevance for Modern Leadership

The events of the rebellion against Usman provide valuable lessons for modern leadership in various aspects:

Good Governance: This incident demonstrates the importance of good governance. Usman failed to manage public perception of his policies, allowing accusations of nepotism, while not entirely accurate, to become very convincing. Modern leadership needs to ensure that every policy has a clear, transparent, and accountable basis.

Meritocracy: This incident underscores the importance of meritocracy in appointments. Although Usman's relatives were largely competent, public perception still saw it as nepotism. Modern leadership needs to ensure that appointments are based on competence, not family ties or personal affiliations.

Transparency: Usman's failure to communicate his policies transparently was one of the factors that fueled the rebellion. Modern leadership needs to establish an open system of communication with the public to prevent misperceptions and baseless accusations.

Accountability: Weak oversight of officials during Usman's reign was a contributing factor to dissatisfaction. Modern leadership needs to establish a robust accountability system, where every official is closely monitored and held accountable for their actions.

Conflict Management: This incident demonstrates the importance of effective conflict management. Usman failed to manage the emerging conflict, allowing a small conflict to escalate into a major rebellion. Modern leadership needs to have effective mechanisms to detect, prevent, and resolve conflicts before they escalate into crises.

Ethical Leadership: This incident reminds us that leadership is not only about technical competence, but also about ethics and integrity. The accusations of nepotism against Usman, while not entirely accurate, arose from the perception that he violated the principles of justice and equality taught by Islam.

CONCLUSION

Based on the historical analysis conducted, this study produces several conclusions. First, Usman ibn Affan's reign was marked by territorial expansion, increasing administrative complexity, and changes in the leadership system as the Islamic realm expanded. Second, the appointment of several relatives to important positions, such as Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, Abdullah ibn Sa'd ibn Abi Sarh, Marwan ibn al-Hakam, al-Walid ibn Uqbah, and Abdullah ibn Amir, gave rise to

accusations of nepotism. Although these policies were related to considerations of competence and stability, the lack of political communication contributed to public dissatisfaction. Third, the leadership crisis that led to the rebellion and Usman's assassination was influenced by various factors, including political tensions, economic tensions, tribalism, and conflicts of interest. Thus, Usman's reign crisis was not only related to nepotism, but also to the increasingly complex challenges of governance. These events provide lessons on the importance of meritocracy, transparency, accountability, political communication, and ethical leadership in realizing good governance.

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