

Islam and human rights

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It is a popular belief in the West, owing to their deficient knowledge of the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) that Islam supports values and structures that are incompatible with the principles of human rights. The fact is that Islam established the sanctity of human rights and advocated their promotion and enforcement, about fourteen hundred years before the United Nations declared them in the form of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

If we use human rights as a yardstick to evaluate civilizations, a study of history will reveal that the world was not very civilized before the advent of Islam. Though there were great civilizations before Islam, they were held high in esteem chiefly due to their contributions to the fields of arts and sciences. None did anything to practise human rights in a permanent manner. Advances in human rights, if there were any, derived their legality from the particular ruler or government then in place, and the successor did not consider it necessary to carry on the practice.

It may be mentioned that it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the western political thinkers and jurists educated the masses about the notions of civil liberties and fundamental rights. This awareness prompted the people to strive for their rights, resulting in a bitter series of tussles between the rulers and the subjects. Privileges were stubbornly withheld by the rulers, whereas, the subjects fought vehemently for them. Revolutions took place, and with each revolution the people won a new concession. In this way, through the ordeal of bloodshed and struggle, a growing body of rights developed.

Islam, on the contrary, took a significantly different course. First of all, as God had Himself conferred them, the people did not have to violently take these rights from some ruler. Secondly, being ordained by God, human rights cannot be abolished or abrogated by any man or group of men. Every Muslim ruler or government must recognise and enforce them, as they are part and parcel of the Islamic faith. If one fails to do so, or denies them, or practically violates them while paying lip service to them, the verdict of the Quran in such a case is clear and unequivocal: "...And whoever judges not by what Allah has revealed, those are the disbelievers." (5:44) "...And whoever judges not by what Allah has revealed, those are the transgressors." (5:47)

Some of the fundamental rights that Islam declares all human beings to possess are:

Right to life: The Quran upholds the sanctity of human life and accords full protection to it. All forms of manslaughter are regarded as heinous crimes. It is said in the Quran: "...Whoever kills a person, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he had killed all humanity..." (5:32), "...And kill not the soul which Allah has made sacred except in the course of justice..." (6:152) "And kill not your children for fear of poverty — We provide for them and for you. Surely the killing of them is a great sin." (17:31) "And kill not the soul which Allah has forbidden except for a just cause.

Islam disregards discrimination between persons on the basis of colour, race, nationality, nobility of birth, wealth, political status, gender, etc. Superiority of a man is determined only on the basis of piety, righteousness, and moral excellence. In his Farewell Sermon, the Prophet declared: "Righteous actions are the only mark of distinction and not wealth, birth, or status in life."

And whoever is slain unjustly, We have indeed given to his heir authority — but let him not exceed the limit in slaying..." (17:33)

Right to equality: Islam disregards discrimination between persons on the basis of colour, race, nationality, nobility of birth, wealth, political status, gender, etc. Superiority of a man is determined only on the basis of piety, righteousness, and moral excellence. In his Farewell Sermon, the Prophet declared: "Righteous actions are the only mark of distinction and not wealth, birth, or status in life."

Similarly, the Quran proclaims: "O mankind, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into tribes and families that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you with Allah is the (one who is the) most righteous of you. Surely Allah is Knowing, Aware." (49:13)

Right to justice: Immense stress has been laid by the Quran on the right to seek justice and the duty to perform justice: "... When you judge between people, you judge with justice..." (4:58) "O you who believe, be maintainers of justice..." (4:135) "O you who believe...let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty..." (5:8) "...And if thou judge, judge between them with equity. Surely Allah loves the equitable." (5:42) "Say: My Lord enjoins justice..." (7:29)

"Surely Allah enjoins justice and the doing of good..." (16:90)

Right to respect: Islam declares that each person, irrespective of his faith, race, gender, or wealth, is worthy of respect. The right to honour and self-respect is inviolable. The Quran says: "Those who love that scandal should circulate respecting those who believe, for them in a grievous chastisement in this world and the Hereafter..." (24:19) "And those who malign believing men and believing women undeservedly, they bear the guilt of slander and manifest sin." (33:58) "O you who believe, let not a folk deride a folk, perchance they may be better than they (are); nor let women (deride) women, perchance they may be better than they (are); neither defame one another, nor insult one another by nick names. Bad is the name of lewdness after faith... Neither backbite one another..." (49:11, 12)

Right to privacy: An individual's right to domestic and personal privacy has been clearly recognised by the Quran: "O you who believe, enter not houses other than your own houses, until you have asked permission... This is better for you that you may be mindful..." (24:27) "O you who believe, avoid most of suspicion...and spy not..." (49:12)

Right to freedom of religion: In an Islamic state every citizen is free to profess and practice any religion that he has adopted. Individuals and government have been strictly forbidden from interfering in the religious affairs of non-Muslim citizens. It is said in the Quran: "There is no compulsion in religion..." (2:256) "And if Allah had pleased, they would not have set up others (with Him). And We have not appointed thee a keeper over them, and thou art not placed in charge of them. And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah..." (6:108, 109)

"And if thy Lord had pleased, all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them. Wilt thou then force men till they are believers?" (10:99) "And say: the truth is from your Lord; so let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve..." (18:29) "Say (O Prophet): O disbelievers, I serve not that which you serve, nor do you serve whom I worship...Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion." (109:1-6)

Right to education: The pursuit of knowledge is considered a task of great importance in Islam. It is pointed out in the Quran: "...Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Are those who know equal with those who know not? But only men of understanding will pay heed." (39:9)

Islam has conferred and acknowledged other fundamental rights also. Their details and illustrations can be seen in the Quran, the Traditions, and the teachings of the Pious Caliphs and other Muslim Jurists.