**Dissent in Islam**

BY N I K H A T S A T T A R 2020-12-11

AMONG other dysfunctional and anti-people characteristics of states that claim to be governing Muslim populations, one is the muzzling of free speech, dissent with the state or traditional religious narrative and open dialogue and debate.  
  
Countries that claim to be otherwise democratic clamp down on anything and anyone their agencies and individuals think might go against their notions of what is good and moral for the public.  
  
One Muslim country employs a moral police that swoops down on ordinary people, especially women, for perceived immoral acts. A few years ago, a senior police official said that women should cover their eyes because they seduce men through them.  
  
Another country imprisons and punishes women with lashes if they protest against the head covering. In Pakistan, a woman is watched at every step, abused for every word she might utter against the majority norm and blamed for every crime against her.  
  
This is not limited to moral policing of women. Many countries are wary of dissidents of government policies, even of allowing debates in educational institutions. In one country, khutbas are monitored, not for their hate content but for anything that could be deemed critical of the government. In Pakistan, people are either afraid of voicing differences or frustrated as the environment for encouraging openness and new ideas becomes increasingly restricted.  
  
Intellectuals perceived to be critical of the political and social environment are barred from giving lectures in universities; educational curricula that would promote robotic patriotism and religiosity are developed. In one conflict-ridden region, when women tried to come together to discuss their role in peace-building, they were visited by security personnel and warned.  
  
Just as Muslim countries are far behind their Western counterparts in ethics, philosophy, technology, science, financial strength, so are they in developing human capital.  
  
Their projects are designed, operated and managed mostly by foreign companies and where locals are employed, they are lowskilled labour. The main reason is their low investment in education. But the intellectual stagnation is also the result of decades of authoritarian rule and curbs on freedom of thought and debate.  
  
Yet, Islam is the faith that brought the best of morality and ethics, to be implemented in every walk of life. The Quran and the life of the Prophet (PBUH) are the guidance that provides humans with a light towards their collective and individual development in this world and preparation for the next. Early Muslim societies created great thinkers and provided platforms for them to travel, cometogether, ponder over books that were obtained from ancient peoples, and translated and wrote huge volumes of groundbrealcing work in mathematics and science.  
  
They met, shared ideas and often disagreed with each other and with the policies and systems of the state. Later, Muslim rulers began to adopt laws aimed at preventing dissent in order to ensure their hold over power. This approach continues.  
  
The Quran instructs Muslims to settle all matters through counselling. The Holy Book states: `Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation. .  
  
(42:38). The surah is `Al Shurah` (consultation).  
  
It is not a case of pronouncing judgement on an issue between two parties; it is a discussion and debate where decisions are taken through consensus. Anyone in the group can disagree and the Quran thus encourages differences of opinion. This could be in any matter: legal, financial, religious or social.  
  
During the time of the Prophet and duringthe rule of the four caliphs, there is not a single incident of punishment due to dissent.  
  
Even God allowed His angels to raise their voices and express their concerns over His plan to create humans: `...Wilt Thou place therein one who willmal(e mischief therein and shed blood? whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?` (2:30). He listened to them and explained His reasons through argument and example.  
  
The Prophet had to face considerable dissent in his lifetime. When it was offensive, he would often pass it off with a goodhearted comment (Seerat Ibn Hisham Vol 1).  
  
Vituperative comments and abuse too were answered through well-reasoned arguments, and well-meaning differences of opinion were welcomed and considered in decisionmaking. Many examples are available of the common public disagreeing with Caliph Umar and his acceptance of their criticism.  
  
During his rule, people were empowered and participated in governance.  
  
The path we follow is not the path towards a progressive state and an intelligent society that could take part in innovation and creativity. Islam advocates finding solutions to all matters of contention by means of discussion rather than by violence.  The writer is a freelance contributor with an interest in religion.  
  
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