

Islam and political change

THE CURRENT DISCUSSION ON ISLAM AND political change has its point of departure in the thesis advanced by Prof Ernest Gellner (*Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*, 1994) that scriptural Islam constitutes a self-contained system of beliefs, values, ethics, attitudes and practices, and a high culture and supra-ideology which can together serve as the framework for modernisation without necessarily requiring the enhancement of individualism, secularism and general liberal lifestyles. Such being allegedly the *sui generis* properties of the Islamic ethos Gellner concludes that the Muslim world would always fall short of cultivating virtues intrinsic to democratic society, those pertaining to rational, individualistic ethics and norms — things which suddenly and accidentally became part of the liberalising impact of the Protestant Reformation.

While some scholars agree with his observations and in their empirical studies of the contemporary Muslim world identify cultural features which obstruct the consolidation of a democratic civil society, others identify features in the Islamic heritage which were or could have led to the evolution of parallel institutions had Islam also been transformed through the scientific revolutions and discoveries which wrought great changes in Europe.

I would like to challenge the essentialist approach of Gellner in that he looks upon Islam as an unchanging system of beliefs and practices. Historically dogmatic forms of Christianity gave fierce resistance to liberal ideas and it took nearly three hundred years (if we take Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to have done the spade work for liberalism) before the power of the church was broken and the rising

COMMENT



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middle and working classes forced Christian societies to incorporate secularism, liberalism and ideas of democracy into the political system.

Consequently it is not unthinkable that Muslim intellectuals can cross the threshold into modernity and lead their societies towards greater secularisation and democratisation. Culture, in whatever sense one conceptualises it, can never be a sufficient basis for determining the behaviour of societies or individuals and groups. The necessity to solve problems and to face concrete challenges forces the hand of the most unbending cultural systems. Just witness how Saudi Arabia is hosting a conference on terrorism whereas its school textbooks until now have been teaching pupils that Islam is the only true religion in the world and the rest is falsehood. One should be very surprised if such an education does not produce a highly intolerant and closed mindset because to insist on only one truth, especially metaphysical truth, is to lay grounds for perpetual strife and conflict. Those brought up to believe in their own perfection invariably resort to terroristic outbursts when their weaknesses are exposed; sometimes such terrorism can boomerang and hit those who originally fostered it. No doubt the Saudi ruling family is itself now a target of attack and wants to change the situation somehow. Hopefully we will see the Saudis begin to preach another type of Islam.

When we look around the contemporary Muslim world we find great political and ideological debate going on regarding the questions of Islamic law, democracy, secularism and human rights. Not surprisingly efforts have been made in different parts of the Muslim world to revive

pre-colonial Islamic society or to create altogether ahistorical utopias such as the Taliban tried in Afghanistan, but most of the time even fundamentalist Muslims are dealing with modern concepts and values.

Thus, for example, the most ambitious attempt to create an Islamic state which in some sense is based on electoral support has been the Iranian one. While the right to vote is granted to Muslims on a universal basis, candidates contesting elections to the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, have to be approved by a board of experts on Islam. All bills passed by the Majlis have to be approved by the same board before they became law. Within the limited freedom of choice the Iranian people have been voting for liberal clerics such as Khatami, but it would be wrong to confuse such a form of government with a genuine democracy. We need not labour hard to point out that dissidents, free-thinkers and religious minorities and sects continue to face repression and persecution in the Ayatollahs' Iran.

Our own example of Pakistan is most relevant. We probably hold the world record in modern times of devoting all our 57 years of independence to vain attempts to prove that an Islamic state can be a modern democracy. We have primitive Hudood laws and blasphemy laws and discriminatory laws of evidence and barbaric laws on rape in our legal system and yet keep trumpeting that we are a moderate Islamic democracy! Sooner or later we will have to choose between being a fascist religious state or a modern democracy as our political objective. Trying to synthesise them in the hope of creating some syncretic entity is not going to produce any worthwhile result. A cross between such different species will surely be intel-

leetually and practically barren.

I believe that if Muslim intellectuals in general and Pakistani intellectuals in particular seriously discuss the Islamic state project they would have no problem in showing that it is no more than an anachronism. Pointing the finger at the Bush regime to prove that democracy is nothing but a garb for imperialist expansion is good rhetoric, but bad political theory. It would be like saying that all Muslims are terrorists because in recent years many terrorists have been identified as Muslims.

Our task is neither to develop a victim-hood discourse nor a self-righteous and self-congratulatory one; this we have been doing for too long and it has not led us anywhere except deeper into a maze of circumlocution and sophistry. The task for independent intellectuals is to determine how modern Muslim societies can achieve rapid economic development as well as social justice. Both are matters of the social and material world and require knowledge of comparative history, economic and political theory and indeed sociology.

We need to reflect critically on why Muslim societies are afflicted by authoritarianism, corruption, massive inequalities and lack of education. We can't reasonably argue that our bad situation is the result of us being bad Muslims but then not explain why Westerners have it all good when they are not even Muslims. It is time to stop making contradictory and nonsensical statements.

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