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**Arabic as panacea?**

How convenient it is for people to earn brownie points at the cost of others and with no cost to themselves. The Senate approved, with just one dissenting vote, the Compulsory Teaching of the Arabic Language Bill 2020 mandating the teaching of Arabic in primary and secondary schools in Islamabad. Within six months, the language will be taught in all schools in the city from grades 1 to 5 while its grammar will be taught through grades 6 to 12.

The proposer of the bill claimed that "we would not go through the problems we are currently facing if we understood the Holy Quran." A minister concurred saying that the government "categorically supported" the bill and according to Article 31 of the constitution.

This is one of a piece with the Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam bill that was passed by the Punjab Assembly last year requiring passing an exam on the Quran prior to getting a PhD degree. So eager were the assembly members to earn free hasanat that many later admitted they had voted in favour of the bill without having read it.

Courtesy of Ali Usman Qasmi, a professor of history at LUMS, we know that this is also of a piece over time. At the time of the making of the constitution, Maulana Kausar Niazi, a minister in Mr Bhutto’s government, advocated Arabic as the national language, it being the mother tongue of all Muslims because it was the language of Ummahat-ul-Momineen – the Mothers of all Muslims. One valiant member demurred arguing the case of Urdu since – being a 'lashkari zabaan' – Urdu qualified as the national language of a Muslim state.

Much earlier, in 1951, the Aga Khan had proposed the adoption of Arabic as the state language to put an end to the language controversy in Pakistan. Our great leaders specialize in never directly addressing burning issues; they would rather go for convoluted and bizarre solutions that make the problems worse than before.

If these legislators really believe all the wonderful things that follow learning the Arabic language, why don’t they vote themselves a two-year sabbatical to learn Arabic thereby purifying themselves against horse-trading. That would truly set an example for all the children whom they wish to turn into exemplary moral citizens?

Asides from this brazen hypocrisy, the nation should be deeply concerned about the intellectual calibre of these legislators. Where is the evidence on which all their holy claims are based? Have they evaluated the outcome of the religious studies injected into the curriculum by Ziaul Haq, the 'warrior of Islam'? How come they are themselves shouting to the heavens that Pakistan is the most corrupt country in the world where not even a single project can be found untainted by a scam?

How do they explain the fact that almost three-fourths of students nurtured on this overdose of religious studies have been found cheating on assignments during this period of online teaching? What is the basis for the presumption that even more such additions in the curriculum would change these trends?

Are the legislators implying that perfect morality prevails in the Arab world where all children and adults are fluent in the Arabic language? If not, why would the language work miracles in Pakistan when it has not done so in those countries that are fighting among themselves while speaking the same “language of the heavens”? And, why has this mandate been reserved only for schools in Islamabad? Is Islamabad particularly un-Islamic and thus in need of strong medicine or is it particularly blessed to be the sole recipient of the legislature’s benevolence?

How does this radical intervention square with the Single National Curriculum that, despite being meticulously planned by 400 pious experts, has no place for the teaching of Arabic? Instead, the SNC has placed its hopes in the miracle of English – poor elementary school children would learn maths and general science in the language that neither they nor their teachers know with any degree of competence.

May the Almighty have mercy on our children, hapless victims of the pedagogical illiteracy and moral posturing of our rulers. It is easy to forget that children have rights that they themselves are unable to articulate and fight for. We need an independent agency representing children that would approve all legislation affecting their rights and welfare. That would be the only way to stop the damage inflicted by uninformed policymaking and the pernicious competition of moral one-upmanship.

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