

Islamic way of life

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Introduction

This theme came to my mind after news broke out of unrest in Arab countries like Egypt, following the ending of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's twenty-three year rule in Tunisia. As per the news till date, almost seventy four people have been killed and several hundreds injured in the violent clashes that have taken place in Egypt. A common question that has emerged as a fall out of these events is that why all Muslim countries are ruled by despotic kings. Let me clarify the stand of Islam in this case.

Examples from political history

Let me take the case of Egypt. King Farouk I, ruled Egypt until 1952 when his regime was overthrown by a coup. This revolution was supported by leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. (A non-governmental organisation, founded in 1928 in Egypt and now the largest political opposition organisation in many Arab states; Jamaat-e-Islami is its Asian chapter. The Brotherhood views secular rulers in Muslim countries as an obstruction towards the implementation of the complete system of Islam and mobilizes the masses against the rulers.)

In 1953, Egypt was declared a republic and General Naguib, 52, was appointed its first president and prime minister. In the same year, the President took serious action against the Brotherhood leaders. He was later dismissed and put on house-arrest by Gamal Abdel-Nasser, who then assumed the office of prime ministership. After Nasser's death in 1970, Anwar el Sadat succeeded him as president. The Brotherhood was enraged by Sadat's political moves. In order to curb unrest, Sadat ordered execution of many Brotherhood leaders in February 1981. The order was given based on the information received by intelligence sources and was aimed at combating the potential insurgents. The round up missed a cell in the military led by Lieutenant Khalid Islambouli, who succeeded in assassinating Anwar Sadat that October. Sadat was succeeded by his vice president Hosni Mubarak in 1981. According to the BBC, Mubarak has survived six assassination attempts since then. Given the tumultuous condition in Egypt now, either he will be assassinated by the radicalists or he will manage to flee.

It must be mentioned that when Gamal Abdel-Nasser had come to power, though undemocratically, he had proffered a wise solution to end the unrest. He said that while he may remain a political sovereign, the ministry of education can be offered to the Muslim Brotherhood. But the Brotherhood refused. The result is that Egypt stands destroyed. This is the case of most of the 57 Muslim countries. While the

OPEC countries remain unscathed for now, they will not remain so for long. This is because they neither encouraged industrialization nor worked towards creating a robust economy. Economically, therefore, they may be ranked even behind countries like South Korea and Singapore because the latter have emerged as strong and growing economies.

Obsession in Muslim minds

The Muslims have become passionately obsessed with the idea of Islam being a complete system of life. They slogan propagated is, "Islam deen, kamil-o-shamil". There lies an inherent fallacy with such an obsession, which leads to unrest. While it is true that Islam guides man about his conduct in daily life, it does not seek "implementation" of these ideals. A great teaching was imparted by all the Prophets. Jesus Christ said

Give to Caesar what is due to Caesar and give to God what is due to God

According to a Hadith tradition

Give to ruler, what is due to him and ask your right from God (Al Bukhari)

This Hadith conveys that Islam has division of work. One sphere of work is administration, which is the subject of implementation. The other sphere of work pertains to the social system, which is a subject of following. In other words, rulers should be responsible for administration of law and order. The others that is, the non-governmental organisations must take care of education and reform in the society. Unfortunately, organisations like the Brotherhood integrated these two aspects and devised a third sphere comprising both, which was clearly against the law of nature and aimed at instituting the complete system.

In light of the above Hadith, Nasser's recommendation of dividing administration and education was correct. Unlike in the times of kingship, the modern-day democratic government is elected by the people, after every prescribed term. And the representative, who is elected by the people, runs the administration. The other areas of society like education and reforms can be led by non governmental organisations. Islam prescribes just such a division of work. Unfortunately, the modern-day thinkers viewed this division of work as separation of religion and politics.

Let us take the case in point to understand the ill effects of not segregating education and administration. Egypt is the most populated country in the Middle East and a significant number of poor Egyptians live in poor and overcrowded conditions with limited food supply and inadequate access to clean water, good quality health care, or education. Had the organisations like Brotherhood laid focus on educating the masses and imparting vocational studies, they could have changed the economic landscape of Egypt. Imparting education is a continuous process and goes on generation after generation. But they did not do so.

Similar to Nasser's proposal was the offer extended by General Ayyub Khan in Pakistan. But the clerics refused his offer of managing the education system of the country. This is because their minds were obsessed with the idea of taking charge of complete control including the law and order of the land. But unfortunately, the Brotherhood and other thought leaders failed to understand that division of work was an Islamic principle to avoid confrontation. They could not recognize that while Islam urges its proponents to speak the Truth, it does not seek its implementation by force. This is because Islam aims at addressing individual minds so that they choose to refrain from indulging into malpractices.

Let me explain this with an example. A verse in the Quran reads

We sent our messengers with evidence and, with them, We sent down the Book and the Scales of Justice, so that men might act in all fairness (57:25)

The above verse was interpreted to mean that justice must be implemented by force. This was a clear deviation from Islam. The use of passive voice in this verse points at the recipient of the action rather than the performer. This implies that an individual must stand on justice in his daily life; it however cannot be implemented coercively. This is because justice as a concept pervades all aspects of human behaviour and cannot be a subject of implementation; it will remain a subject of following.

It was in reaction to the radical elements and to safeguard their rule that the rulers in Muslim countries adopted dictatorial form of government. Restrictions were placed on media and freedom of expression and despotism became an act of self defense. There lay a huge wisdom in division of work but later-day Muslims did not understand its importance.

Example from the Abbasid period

The period of Muhaditheen (read as “Muhadiseen” or the Hadith teachers) during the Abbasid dynasty is described amongst one of the best periods of Islamic history. The Abbasid dynasty in those days had all the evils that the present-day Muslims complain of but the Muhaditheen chose to not confront the rulers. One Muhaddith was asked whether the ruler should be confronted if he spends the Zakat (charity) money on himself. The Muhaddith replied saying that even then the ruler should not be confronted. The Muhaditheen themselves followed this approach in letter and spirit. The result of the non-confrontational approach was that they could dedicate themselves to the collection of the Hadith, which had not yet been compiled.

If it were not for their wise policy of non-interference in political matters, the succeeding generations would have been bereft of the wisdom that lay in the Hadith. It is important to highlight that while the Quran is the ideology, Hadith presents its practical model. Never before in history were the Prophets allowed to work but due to the efforts of these Hadith teachers, the model of Islam became preserved.

Opportunities in the modern world

The modern world proffers unprecedented opportunities in every field. The scientists did great work by unfolding the signs of God in nature, as was conveyed in the following verse of the Quran

We shall show them Our signs in the universe and within themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth (41:53)

The Muslims on the other hand, remained engrossed in futile confrontations. They failed to avail the immense opportunity that lay in store as the scientists uncovered the laws of nature. These opportunities were harnessed only by those who utilized them to prosper materially – be it in engineering, architecture, war technology, business etc but the believers failed to use it.

It was the responsibility of the non-governmental organisations to work towards strengthening the society, educational institutions and other non political areas but they too failed to recognize their role. They did not understand that Islam had two different duties – one being administration and the other being society-building. Throughout later Islamic history, this model was adopted on a significant scale only by the Muhaddith who observed a silent accord with the Abbasid rulers whereby the rulers were

entrusted with charge of administration and the Muhadditheen got involved in preservation of the Hadith. Since the later-day Muslims did not replicate this model, it led to flourishing of dictatorship in most Muslim countries.

I once met a big Arab leader and he himself admitted that the government crushes organisations that arouse anti-government sentiments, as an act of self defense. This answers why despotic rulers run Muslim countries. I would therefore reiterate that the concept of dictatorship is not derived from the Islamic teachings. It is a fallacious perception.

Muslims therefore are required to re-think so that the non-confrontational approach of Muhadditheen can be revived. The Sufi saints also kept out of the administration and concentrated efforts towards spiritual nourishment of people by developing khanqahs. To this extent, their model was acceptable but they devised new ways of muraqba (meditation) which was incorrect.

There is a strong need to revive the concept of division of work because then the society will be able to progress in totality. The division should be two-fold. One aspect being Administration (Intezaam ka nizaam) and the other being Reform (Islaah ka nizaam). While administration will fall under the purview of the ruler, reform will be undertaken by non-governmental organisations.

The teachings of Islam pervade the daily life of man and in this sense it can be called the complete way of life. Some traditions and verses pertaining to daily behaviour are noted as follows:

While walking, if you see a pebble lying on the road, you must remove it (Al Bukhari)

Speak the truth (Mishkat)

Give full measure, when you measure, and weigh with accurate scales (17:35)

While the teachings pertain to diverse aspects of life, it does not mean that if these are not being followed, they will be enforced. It must be understood that virtues cannot be forcefully implemented. For example you cannot force people to speak truth and be honest. Virtues are inculcated in spirit so man's conscience becomes so awakened that he follows them on his own. It is preposterous to think that virtues can be inculcated by applying whip; this will never happen.

While all the Prophets taught division of work, the Prophet Muhammad practically demonstrated this. The Muhadith then followed the Prophetic tradition in spirit and action. But this is not the case today. In every Muslim country, there exist two groups – the rulers and the ruled. Contrary to God's scheme, the ruled always indulge in complaints against the policies of their ruler. I once met a group of Muslims in an Arab country. They were extremely anxious and dissatisfied because the benefits of oil exploration were being harped by a single family. I told this Islamist group that instead of complaining, they must discharge the duty they have in non-political fields.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that Islam being a complete way of life does not mean that it has to be implemented. It means that Islam seeks to address individual minds such that the virtues become a matter of conscious following in their lives. People often think that while Islam propagates justice (adal) as one of its important principles, it also seeks to establish it. This is a great fallacy. Justice can only be a subject of following, not implementation. Making justice a subject of implementation, gives it a political interpretation.

There lies a big wisdom in understanding the differentiation that while Islam gives guidance for all spheres of an individual life, it does not seek to implement this guidance. Unless, the Muslims recognize the principle of division of work, they will not be able to grasp the correct line of action.