Civil Society in the Muslim World

Excerpt from
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A symposium themed "Civil Society and the Challenge of Modernisation : the case of the Muslim World", organised by the Development and Peace Foundation was held in Berlin, Germany on 14 and 15 December 2001. The essay below was the keynote address at that symposium.

It would surprise many people to learn that there was a concept of ‘civil society’ of sorts in classical Islamic philosophy. Al-Ijtima al-madani, roughly translated as ‘civil society’ was a vision of a polity of virtue guided by belief in God and based upon values rooted in the Divine -- values such as justice, equality, freedom, compassion and dignity. In this polity, to further adumbrate, the human being, his rights and his dignity, would be protected by law, the Syariah, and by leaders who are just, knowledgeable and upright. The human being, or citizen in modern parlance, would in turn fulfil his responsibilities to himself, to his community and to God, the most important of which would be to “uphold virtue and forbid vice”, as required by the Quran.

The philosopher who contributed most to the development of this idea at the theoretical level was Al-Farabi (870 - 950 CE). He constructed a typology of societies with ‘civilised values’ as the criteria. Ibn Miskawayh (936 - 1030) and the illustrious Ibn Khaldun (1332 - 1406) were two other philosophers who also reflected upon the concept of ‘civil society’.

Western Thought
It should be obvious that the concept of civil society in classical Islamic philosophy is in some significant respects different from its parallel idea in Western thought. In contemporary Western thought, the concept of civil society is associated primarily with ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ -- meaning by which the space and scope that exist for individual and organisation between the family and the state to function with maximum freedom. While the pursuit of civil society goals may lead to ethical ends, moral imperatives -- the idea of virtue as conventionally understood for instance -- are not the defining attributes of civil society. Nonetheless, there is an important similarity in the two visions of civil society. Freedom in Islam enables the individual to possess and exercise rights just as it allows him to uphold and fulfil responsibilities. In other words, without freedom of the individual, it will not be possible for the Muslim to undertake one of Islam’s most sacred missions, namely, “to uphold virtue and to forbid vice”. Individual freedom in the contemporary West, needless to say, is the very foundation for the expression of a multitude of rights and for the exercise of choice.

Reality
If classical Islam had a vision of sorts of freedom and civil society, was it translated into reality? There is evidence to show that at various points in history, Islamic civilisation respected and protected the rights of the individual and ensured that both ruler and ruled abided by the law. Apart from the period of the righteous Caliphs -- the period following the death of the Prophet Muhammad -- there were outstanding cases of exemplary rulers in the Umayyad, Abassid and Uthmaniyyah dynasties going out of their way to ensure that the divine values of justice, equality, freedom and compassion reigned supreme.

Nonetheless, it is true that the ‘polity of virtue’ was not the general trend in the Islamic civilisation of antiquity. Why did it not emerge as a dominant force? What were the obstacles?
Dynastic Rule
The rise of a feudal, monarchical system immediately after the dynamic egalitarianism of the period of the righteous caliphs was undoubtedly one of the factors that led to the gradual decline of virtues such as freedom. By introducing hereditary, dynastic rule, Muawiyyah, the fifth Caliph, changed the very character of the polity. Egalitarian politics rooted in the rights of the people and justice for the masses gave way to palace oriented politics which often placed the interests of the ruler above the welfare of the ruled. As this transformation took place, the ideal of an al-i'jima' al-madani became more and more distant.

Jurisprudence
A certain change in the development of Islamic jurisprudence also played a role. From the ninth or tenth centuries, Muslim jurists became somewhat more cautious about emphasising rights and freedoms compared to the first two or three centuries partly because of an exaggerated fear of the negative influence of Hellenistic thought upon the fundamentals of the Islamic faith. The creative absorption of ideas on freedom from Greek philosophy by Al-Farabi and other thinkers like Al-Kindi, Al-Razi and Ibn Sina, provoked a backlash from a section of the conservative religious elites who were determined to preserve what they regarded as the purity of the religion.

Assaults
However, it was not the intellectual debate on the influence of Hellenistic thought upon Islam which strengthened the cautious, conservative tendency within Muslim jurisprudence. What made it into a dominant trend were two major external assaults upon Islamic civilisation. The first were the Mongol invasions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which destroyed the great centres of learning in the Muslim world culminating in the disastrous devastation of Baghdad in 1258 -- Baghdad which was then the world's most famous storehouse of knowledge, its leading beacon of scholarship. The destruction of Baghdad and other such cities of culture and civilisation was such a traumatic experience for the Muslim world that its caliphs and jurists ceased to embark upon intellectual voyages of discovery and instead chose to conserve and preserve what little was left after those barbaric assaults. Sustaining power, maintaining law and order, keeping the community united by studiously avoiding disputes and conflicts, became far more important to both rulers and ruled alike than developing the rights of the people or expanding the scope for social justice.

Colonial Conquest
An even more traumatic experience for the Muslim world than the Mongol invasion was Western colonial conquest and control beginning from the sixteenth century. Muslims lost their hold over almost everything -- their lands, their governments, their economies, their laws, their cultures, their societal values, their education systems. Dominated and subjugated by an overwhelmingly powerful alien force, Muslims were in no position to develop values such as justice or freedom or to enhance the rights of the people. Islamic civilisation had been conquered and defeated. This reality is a vital factor in trying to understand the Muslim world today and its ability to develop civil society.

Contemporary Accomplishments
How have contemporary Muslim societies fared in their quest for freedom and rights? A number of Muslim societies observe some of the principles of freedom and human rights. From Malaysia and Indonesia to Bangladesh and Turkey, there are elections and competing political parties, conterminous with some scope for dissent and a certain degree of public accountability -- features which are readily identifiable with democratic governance. Indeed, some of the most remarkable movements for freedom and justice initiated and propelled by civil society actors in recent decades have occurred in Muslim countries. The 1979 Iranian Revolution which had the enthusiastic support of all segments of civil society and led to the overthrow of a despotic monarch would be a striking example. In a sense, the popular movement against the autocratic rule of a clerical elite in Iran today -- again sustained by a wide spectrum of civil society groups -- which has expressed itself in two presidential elections so far, in 1997 and 2001 respectively, would be yet another example of the people's
perennial struggle for freedom and justice. The mass movement which emerged from the womb of civil society and resulted in the ouster of the dictator, Suharto, in Indonesia -- the world's most populous Muslim nation -- in May 1998 offers further proof of the vigour and vitality of autonomous social actors, outside the formal structures of state power, in certain parts of the Muslim world.

Authoritarian Elites
While these stupendous developments augur well for freedom and civil society, one should remain cognisant of some of the grave threats to these ideals. The authoritarian power of elites bent on preserving and perpetuating their position and prestige would be indisputably one such threat. These elites, religious or secular, military or civil, feudal or modern, have been known to suppress dissent, imprison, torture even eliminate their critics and emasculate and decimate autonomous, independent social and administrative institutions in order to ensure that they remain in power ad infinitum. There is perhaps not a single Muslim country where such elites have not held sway at some point or other in the contemporary period. Sometimes these elites, especially the feudal, monarchical ones in places such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, or Morocco or Brunei, are bolstered, even sustained, by Western imperialistic forces.

How such elites had emerged and why they are able to wield enormous powers is a complex phenomenon beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to say that the euphoria of Independence; the aura surrounding the ‘founding fathers’ of the nation; the intoxicating appeal of nationalism; the relative weakness of countervailing social and political forces at the time of Independence; certain deeply ingrained cultural attitudes about authority; and the centralising tendencies of the ideology of development and the developmental process itself have all conspired to reinforce the power of the ruling class. To this, we should add -- what we have alluded to -- the role of imperialism in perpetuating authoritarianism within the nation state.

Islamic Resurgence
There is another equally serious threat to freedom and civil society in the Muslim world. It comes from a trend that is often described as ‘Islamic resurgence’. Though in their drive to establish an Islamic State, these resurgents, like other dissidents, espouse the ideals of freedom, human rights and civil society, a close examination of their ideology and their performance in power reveals a pronounced proclivity towards authoritarianism and hegemonic dominance. Nowhere is this inclination more vividly expressed than in their attitude towards ideas on Islam -- Islamic law, Islamic politics, Islamic economy and so on -- which are different from theirs. Convinced that their vision of Islam is the only vision which has divine sanction, the resurgents exercise a virtual monopoly over ‘the truth’. This is evident in the way in which the ruling clerical clique in Iran has imposed a rigid dogmatic interpretation of Shiite Islam over the population. Religious elites in Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Pakistan have also often adopted a highly authoritarian approach to Islamic law, negating and nullifying contrarian ideas which they dismiss contemptuously as ‘liberal’, ‘modernist’ or ‘secular’. The most glaring example of a doctrinaire, authoritarian practice of Islam which brought misery and suffering to the people under its tutelage was of course the bigoted Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

Though the Taliban represented an extreme version of dogmatic Islam, many resurgents in other parts of the world exhibit in varying degrees, similar attitudes towards law, non-Muslim minorities, women, ‘non-Islamic’ culture and so on. Isn’t it significant that resurgents, whether they are in power, or struggling to achieve power, invariably equate an Islamic state with unquestioning fidelity to hudud, or Islamic criminal law? Thus, chopping off the hands of the thief and stoning the adulteress become the defining characteristics of their concept of an Islamic state. Similarly, resurgents everywhere regard it as their sacred mission to restrict the role of women in the public sphere and to re-order gender relations in such a manner that male supremacy is firmly entrenched in not only the prevailing societal structures but also in the collective consciousness of the people.
The Prophet’s Example
This authoritarian approach to Islam, with its strong patriarchal tendency, it should be emphasised over and over again, is at total variance with the Islam associated with the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet’s primary concern was raising the moral consciousness of the people, not exercising power and control over them. He sought to reform the social order through his shining example of moral suasion. Imposing rigid rules upon society and punishing the wrongdoer were not the hallmarks of his leadership. This is why he endeavoured to give concrete meaning to God’s commandment to ‘uphold virtue and forbid vice’ through nurturing and nourishing values such as justice and freedom, equality and dignity, love and compassion within his nascent community. He did not establish a special force which policed and patrolled the people’s morals by instilling fear in them of dire punishment and harsh penalties. Incidentally, this is what the Taliban regime in Afghanistan tried to do in order to create a virtuous society.

In this regard, it is also important to observe that given the prevailing norms and practices, the Prophet’s treatment of women was commendable. The woman’s consent had to be obtained voluntarily before she could be given away in marriage; she was encouraged to keep her maiden name after marriage; she had the right to education; she could own and inherit property; she could do business in her own name; she could participate in the affairs of the community; she could criticise those who wielded power; indeed she was even given the opportunity to exercise authority. In a nutshell, for the Prophet, the woman, on the whole, enjoyed rights and shouldered responsibilities which were similar to the man’s. And, in their potential for religious piety and devotion, there was no distinction between male and female. Paradise in the hereafter was as much her destiny as it was his. The Prophet, in a real sense, affected a revolution in the status of the woman in the context of his time. There is no need to state the obvious: his achievements contrast dramatically with the attempt by contemporary resurgents to subordinate, even subjugate women.

Conservative Islam
The contrast between the Islam of the Prophet and the Islam of the resurgents is so stark that one wonders whether the resurgence that is occuring today is Islamic at all. Can we call this an ‘Islamic resurgence’ if it does not bring into fruition the eternal values of love and compassion, of justice and freedom, of equality and dignity embodied in the Quran and exemplified in the life of the Prophet? Or, is this resurgence the contemporary expression of some other trend in Muslim history?

In truth, what is projected as Islamic resurgence today is an approach and understanding of the religion that has grown out of an ethos of defeat, conquest and subjugation. We have seen how colonial conquest created a hiatus between the spirit of justice of early Islam and a conservative approach to law and society preoccupied as it were with preserving power that developed in the later centuries as a reaction to external onslaughts upon Muslim civilisation. It is this reactionary, conservative, law oriented, power centred Islam that the resurgents have inherited and seek to propagate.

Global Hegemony
This approach to Islam with all its authoritarian tendencies has become even stronger in the post-colonial era partly because of the existing global system. Since the centres of global power located largely in the West are overwhelmingly dominant, and since the present pattern of hegemony is in some respects rooted in the colonial past, the resurgents have become acutely conscious of the need to preserve and protect the identity of their religion defined in puristic, puritanical terms. In other words, the resurgents, given their patrimony, react to what is perceived as Western, more accurately, American global hegemony, by asserting their exclusive, conservative, authoritarian version of Islam.

If anything, the gross injustices generated by global hegemonic forces -- which impact adversely upon Muslims and people everywhere -- have reinforced further the determination
of the resurgents to confront the system. For some of them, since the global hegemon, Washington, relies so much upon its military might to perpetuate its dominant power, the only way of confronting the system is through force and violence. Those resurgents who advocate this ideology of violence would view the 11 September attack upon the US as a victory for their struggle against hegemony.

But the use of violence as a means of fighting US hegemony, however violent that hegemonic power maybe, only undermines the values that Islam professes. It subverts the quest for a civil society, “a polity of virtue” which cannot be accomplished through blood and iron, especially since Islam is a religion which cherishes peace. In fact, the term ‘Islam’ itself means peace through submission to God.

Peace
Fortunately, however, there are millions and millions of Muslims -- many, many more than the minuscule number who employ violence on behalf of the faith -- who see Islam as it should be seen: a religion of peace inherently orientated towards values such as justice and freedom, equality and dignity, love and compassion which must lead inevitably to the creation of a civil society. Muslims who choose this path are no less committed than the militant resurgents to fundamental social and political transformation in their own societies and at the global level. They too would like to see an end to elite dominance in domestic politics inasmuch as they would like to see an end to US hegemony over the global system. But the means one uses to achieve these ends are as important as the ends themselves. Ignoble means cannot achieve noble ends. Senseless, mindless violence will only tarnish the beauty of Islam.

For Muslims who understand the true meaning and message of Islam their mission in the twenty-first century is crystal clear: to help create a global community of peace guided by universal spiritual and moral values rooted in the Divine. A community which was known in the past, as it will be known in the future, as a civil society.