

Modernity and Islam: In quest of compatibility

Islam and modernity aren't necessarily antithetical. Even as Muslims enjoy the fruits of modernity, Islam continues to struggle against the dark sides of modernity. Nonetheless, Islam is neither succumbing to modernity nor losing out to post modernity!

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RELATIONSHIP between Islam and modernity lies in the interaction between Islam and the West at different levels and in different forms, and is a centuries old phenomenon. Modernity, and its related concepts and ideas, has contradicted Islam since Christian civilisation came to produce and embody modernity in the last three hundred years.

Islam engaged itself in a contention with modernity as Muslim civilisations first rejected it due to its Christian nature during the 18th and 19th centuries. Since then Islam has long been confronting a challenge on the question of modernity. This challenge obviously came from the western scholars, most of whom still argue that Islam hasn't yet fully embraced modernity.

For them, there are some modern phenomena which aren't dealt with in Islam; meaning its (Islam) failure to address issues linked to modernity viz modern state institutions and economy, secularism, and most importantly democracy. In the wake of such concerns that Islam and Muslims are characterised as being incompatible with modernity, this article explores whether Islam is really opposed to modernity in the contemporary world.

It is somehow widely believed in the West that acceptability of Islam can come only through its transition into modernity, which is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon usually defined in universalistic and essentialist terms.

Hence, advocates of the modern schools of thought say that Islam is still in its traditional form, which is incongruent with modern life as well as the modern world. But this argument can be countered if we say that Islam and Muslims mustn't adopt modernity by incorporating all modern beliefs and practices incompatible with Islam.

Considering this fact it wouldn't be irrational to bridge Islam with modernity even if it is set apart from many attributes of the western modernism! And at the same time it requires analysis to see to what extent Islam follows the basic tenets of modernity.

Going back in history, we can see that during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, as soon as Islam came in closer ties with Europe, it was introduced to military technology, European law and the arts. Conversely, Europe was also influenced by Islamic thought.

Despite the intensity of cultural encounters coupled with the consolidation of British hegemony at that period, the colonisation of Islamic societies didn't give way to Islamic fundamentalism directed against western dominance but to Islamic modernism, an ideology of Muslim restructuring.

A clear consequence of the mutual impact of modernisation and Islam can be best illustrated by the emergence of modern Turkey, which was the first to adopt modernism and project a conscious or unconscious blend of Islamic values and practices.

After Turkey, Muslim countries like Iran, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, the Philippines

and many others, particularly in the Middle East, absorbed modernity while also allowing radical changes in the political system.

Nevertheless, many Islamic states like Saudi Arab, Syria, UAE, Jordan, and Brunei are still ruled by kings, sheikhs, sultans and dictators. Thus, Islam has always been subjected to modernist schools that do not accept Islam's correlation with modernity largely due to the failure in restoring democracy in most countries of the Muslim world.

The observation that some Islamic countries lack democracy may be fair, but this crisis is by no means on account of Islamic teachings or incompatibility. The root causes lie in a host of factors -- historical, political, economic and cultural -- not in Islam.

Although the modern democratic system was born in the west, it wasn't welcomed there in the beginning because, until the 18th century, the Christian Church opposed modernity and democracy, which became acceptable to western societies only during the 19th century.

On the other hand, the monarchy system was subsequently developed by the traditional Ulema (Islamic scholars) who conferred legitimacy on monarchy not in the light of Islamic teachings but only to prevent anarchy. Thus, an authoritarian power structure was established in the Muslim countries where Islam's followers had been selectively shaped to sustain monarchy.

Monarchy was further consolidated as a result of serving the vested interest of the imperialists, firstly of Europe and then that of the US, who have always propped up corrupt and authoritarian rulers, particularly in the Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Hence, a deep urge for democracy and popular government among the people of those countries has always been frustrated by the heavy hand of the authoritarian rulers, who did permit Islam to establish democracy.



Beside the analysis of such factors, the Holy Qur'an may also help us understand Islam's reluctance in supporting any dictatorship or authoritarianism. In fact, the intrinsic message of the Qur'an does not allow Islam to legitimise any rule constituted or acquired through power. Rather the spirit of modern democracy and the Qur'anic injunction to consult people (Shura) seem to be compatible.

In the contemporary world, Shura can be compared to the democratic process and constitution of proper democratic institutions, for which elections are a necessary requirement. In the same way, the concept of "jihad" (a greater war for Islam) can be used for justifying modernisation and reform of Muslim society. It needs to be recalled that the principle of

jihad ultimately gave birth to reform in Muslim societies and became the mainstay in the struggle for independence against the colonial rule.

Consequently, the activism of Islamism, just like other faith based movements, is a modern phenomenon, and has unfortunately caused Islamist movements come face to face with contemporary violent forms of jihad. The effort to authenticate Islam's adherence to modernity calls for further in-depth discussions on some other issues in Islam, like its introduction to modern banking and monetary systems, formation of Islamic institutions/organisations in the 20th century (OIC, Arab league), etc.

The above analysis doesn't create a

firm ground to supplant Islam absolutely into modernity, rather it shows that, firstly, modernity and Islam are mutually compatible and reconcilable when based on a particular interpretation of Islam and, secondly, that Islamic modernity rejects all modernist principles that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings, practices and beliefs.

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Life below the bottom of the ladder



Both government and donors need to face the harsh realities that local government in Bangladesh often operate at the whim of political and bureaucratic elites who are often insensitive and unresponsive to the needs of the extreme poor.

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ON October 17, 1987, in Paris, over one hundred thousand Parisians gathered to honour the victims of extreme poverty, violence and hunger. This is the city where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed by the members of the United Nations in 1948. They proclaimed that poverty was a violation of human rights with the affirmation that all of humanity was required to unite to fight this scourge in all its guises and ensure these rights were conserved.

These convictions were inscribed in a commemorative stone unveiled on this day. Twenty-three years later, the World Bank estimates that 1.4 billion people around the world still live below the poverty threshold of \$1.25 per day.

According to a recent government publication, approximately one-third of the total population of Bangladesh live below the poverty line and 11% live in extreme poverty. These figures cast shadows over data from reputable international organisations, which argue that about 40% of the population remain

below the poverty line with at least 35 million people living in extreme poverty.

This statistical debate should not hide the stark realities that despite millions of dollars in aid support and countless government interventions, the poverty landscape in Bangladesh remains mired with examples of families that can afford no more than two meals per day for prolonged periods in a year, possess only two pieces of clothing and earn less than Tk.23 per person per day.

The extreme poor families reside in some of the most remote and disconnected locations across Bangladesh, some without regular contact and, in some cases, knowledge of local government officials. While, NGOs or civil society groups deliver public goods where the government has failed to, while this has been the developmental dialectic from independence, the extreme poor have missed out. This is a result of the changing relationship between donors and NGOs, which demands a target-laden, value-for-money, contractual relationship.

The "frontier" zeal of the '70s and '80s,

where civil society organisations introduced innovative programmes to work with the poor, has now been tempered by harsh realities of funding. Donors strive for improved levels of attribution and parliaments across the western world are geared towards showing their public with hard, cold facts that their tax dollar helped to lift millions from poverty.

The reality for Bangladesh is that the million people who have climbed the ladder from poverty may have progressed along this path anyway, without external assistance, while the bottom 10% -- the extreme poor -- remain untouched.

The Paris Declaration in March 2005 and Accra Agenda for Action drawn up in 2008 led to shifts in aid expenditure, however, this movement has done very little to highlight or prioritise the plight of the extreme poor groups.

More recently, a publication by Save the Children, "A Fair Chance at Life," which highlights the progress on UN MDG4, also stressed the need to go beyond the current boundaries of programme delivery and target populations living in geographically remote and ecologically vulnerable areas, previously untouched by development activities. This has led Unicef to re-visit their targeting criteria used by partner organisations in the selection of poor households, or more accurately extreme groups.

The poverty discourse across Bangladesh requires a definitive shot-in-the-arm in order to support families that

are falling further down the poverty ladder. The safety net programmes supported by both government and donors simply fail to target the extreme poor families, and due to political machination eligible families are often excluded.

Both government and donors need to face the harsh realities that local government in Bangladesh often operate at the whim of political and bureaucratic elites who are often insensitive and unresponsive to the needs of the extreme poor.

The perverse patron-client relationship between the powerful and the powerless (not necessarily the extreme poor) which traverses across the political divide requires not just rapprochement by their respective masters but a holistic reinvention of the public service delivery mechanism.

We need programmes that reach the most vulnerable and poor, households that face periodic food insecurity, live on someone else's premises, are severely affected by natural disaster, have no access to micro-finance, do not own productive assets and scavenge for food from wild plants.

The current government has improved the spending plans for poverty reduction programmes and introduced the "ekti bari ekta khamar" programme which, if correctly implemented, will change the face of rural poverty forever. The challenges faced by the government remain manifold and it would be imprudent not to acknowledge the achievements in health, welfare and primary education.

The UNDP Multidimensional Poverty Index places Bangladesh ahead of its illustrious neighbour India, and is often lauded for achievements in reducing infant mortality and improving healthcare for pregnant and lactating mothers.

The economic forecast includes 6% annual growth, expanding garments sector, significant interest from international investors and the possibility of improving trade-links with India and China. However, even governments in these two emerging superpowers realise that investing in poverty reduction programmes maybe a short-term blight on the public purse but, in the long-term, has the potential to fuel economic growth.

In the time of "Digital Bangladesh" and lofty visions of becoming a middle income country by the time Bangladesh reaches 50 years of independence, the government, donors and civil society must not forget the millions that reside below the bottom of the ladder.

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Balancing political process

Both these parties are, truly speaking, neither democratic in spirit nor in their ideology. The constitutions of these parties are ample proof of their un-democratic approach towards politics. This has made it difficult for them to adjust themselves with other democratic parties.

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ESTABLISHING democracy needs time, patience, tolerance, a reasonable level of literacy, political consciousness among people and a considerable degree of egalitarian spirit. Bangladesh achieved freedom through participation of a vast majority of people. Though we may not have all the requisites quoted above for setting up of a strong democratic order we strongly believe that in the not distant future ours will be a democratic country.

Our progress towards achieving a democratic order has been delayed mainly due to the following reasons:

- Hostile attitude of the defeated forces of the war of independence of 1971;
- Assassination of the founder of the nation;
- President Zia's indiscreet measures to promote anti-democratic forces to contain the popularity of the then democratic party, the Awami League. In fact, anti-democratic forces were encouraged to grow at the cost of stopping the progress towards democracy.

With the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the AL, which led the freedom movement, started losing its strength gradually and the cantonment based parties like Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Zia and Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) led by Ershad were encouraged and strengthened.

Both these parties are, truly speaking, neither democratic in spirit nor in their ideology. The constitutions of these parties are ample proof of their un-democratic approach towards politics. This has made it difficult for them to adjust themselves with other democratic parties. This fact is reflected in our political scenario. It appears that we have to wait for sometime more so that both BNP and BJP change themselves into more democratic parties.

BNP appears to be still labouring under the illusion that pro-Islamic parties may reemerge soon as more powerful. BJP, on the other hand, has shown better understanding about the future of politics of Bangladesh. We may

even see development of closer political relation between AL and BJP.

BNP is not in right shape till to-date due to its crisis of leadership at the centre and at the grassroot level. Even a novice in politics may understand that it may take quite sometime for BNP to successfully tackle the present AL, which has assumed a formidable stature due to apt handling of some internal problems of the party by Sheikh Hasina and her advisors.

BJP is slowly but steadily consolidating itself through some reformative measures aiming at its democratisation. We are disappointed at seeing that no appreciable step has been taken by BNP high command to democratise the constitution of the party.

It has been generally accepted that Bangladesh needs balanced politics for healthy growth of democracy. In fact, the days of negative approach to politics is almost over. If BNP has to throw a real challenge to the AL-led government it will have to successfully overcome the following challenges:

- Removing organisational weakness;
- Bringing a change in anti-India politics;
- Organising like-minded forces; and
- Improving relations with the media and tackling the business class, lobbyists, commission agents, consultants and entrepreneurial class. These groups are, in fact, gaining strength due to their systematic approach towards politics.

It is clear that any premature step by the BNP against the government will fail. In fact, it is not yet ready to challenge AL in any field or front. Failure to obtain positive results may further dampen the spirit of the young leaders of BNP. The move to create serious problems for the government will not be proper because the government is fully ready to accept any challenge, whether it is in the field or on the street.

Thus, it may be considered advisable for the BNP to step away from the path of negative politics and cooperate with the government on critical national issues for smooth transition to democracy.

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