RELIGION IN ASIA
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For the majority of Asians religion is important. Even in a country like China where state policy had at one time— especially during the period of the Cultural Revolution—targeted religion, there is a religious revivalism of sorts. While religious revivalism is taking place in certain countries and within certain strata of society, it is equally true that in many parts of the continent the masses have always remained attached to religion even if their elites are secular.

What does this attachment to religion mean for most Asians? There are perhaps four dimensions to it.

Four Dimensions

One, religion means identity to a lot of people. It is a way of defining oneself, of naming oneself. Of course, religion is not the only identity marker for any religious community in Asia. Even in Iran, the only nation in the world that had undergone a popular revolution in the name of religion in the modern era, one's religious identity competes with one's national identity and perhaps even with one's Persian identity which goes beyond Iran as a nation state. At a certain point in time, one's religious identity may be one's primary identity; at another moment it may evolve into one's secondary identity. While there may be certain givens in one's religious identity, such as a belief or a ritual, the larger environment also often shapes one's understanding of one's identity. For instance, if a religious community feels that it is under siege or that its values are being challenged by another culture, it may become more conscious of the need to defend its identity and its integrity.

Two, related to identity—though not synonymous with it—are the rituals, practices, forms and symbols of a religion to which most believers are attached, in one way or another. Practices such as fasting or symbols such as the cross are vital to a religion. When one adheres to prescribed religious practices one perceives oneself, and is perceived by others, as a faithful member of the religious community in question. It is because of the centrality of religious practices and symbols that communities seek to defend and protect them whatever the costs and consequences.

Three, for many Asians religion is also the source of morality. It is the ultimate measure of right and wrong. Religious standards and precepts determine good and evil. One judges a person's private behaviour as well as his public conduct on the basis of values and principles embodied in religion. Thus, a Muslim who consumes alcohol is, in the eyes of fellow Muslims, someone who has done something wrong just as a serial rapist is an evil person from the perspective of all religions.

Four—and perhaps most fundamental—at a personal, intimate level, religion means faith in God, in a Divine Being, in a Transcendent Reality. It is faith in God, whatever the name one assigns to God, which is the bedrock of religion. In those most difficult moments of life, it is this faith that provides solace and sustenance. It is through faith in God and in God's Love and Mercy that the

believing person overcomes the sorrow of the loss of a loved one or comes to terms with the ordeal and anguish of a terminal illness.

While these four dimensions are important for most religious practitioners in Asia, for a lot of Muslims there is perhaps a fifth dimension that is also critical. What is that dimension? Islam for Muslims should also be the basis of law and public policy, of government and state. Why do many Muslims feel this way about their religion?

Five Reasons

The foundational principle in Islam —there is no god but God—is not just a statement of belief, the acknowledgement of which requires the Muslim to submit or to surrender totally to God. It is a principle that embodies an entire worldview, a worldview anchored in the oneness of God or *Tawhid*. No sphere of human existence is separable from *Tawhid*. What this means is that state and society, government and politics, the economy and culture, law and policy have to be based upon, and guided by, *Tawhidic* values or values such as justice and compassion, dignity and love, equality and unity which are all enshrined in the Noble Qur'an. Indeed, *Tawhid*, the Oneness of God, is the basic premise for the unity of the universes, the unity between the human being and his natural environment, the unity of humankind, the unity of the sexes, and the unity of the family. At another level, it is *Tawhid* that unites the material and the spiritual, life and death, this world and the next. Within such a worldview, divorcing life from God, or society from the Divine, would be anathema.

There is another reason why Muslims are so concerned about making their faith in God the basis of state and society. The Prophet Muhammad himself had established a community in Medina which possessed some of the rudimentary characteristics of a state. A charter was formulated which sought to regulate relations between different communities, laws were enacted, public roles were assigned to individuals to manage the affairs of the community and even emissaries were dispatched to neighbouring kingdoms and states. Because Muhammad was more than a Prophet or Messenger of God—he was a political leader, a military commander and a law giver—Muslims have invariably associated state power and governance with the essential message of Islam.

This view of what Islam stands for was reinforced by the evolution of the *shariah* as a code of conduct a few decades after the death of the Prophet. Through laws and precepts, the *shariah* gave concrete expression to some of the values and principles contained in the Qur'an and in the example of the Prophet (the *Sunnah*). In the course of time, it emerged as a body of jurisprudence commanding its own autonomous authority on a whole gamut of issues affecting the life of a Muslim. In fact, the *shariah* today has become almost sacrosanct as Muslims in a number of countries clamour for its introduction—especially its penal code—in their quest for the establishment of so-called genuine Islamic states.

If there is any psychological force that propels this quest, it is the collective Muslim memory of what their civilization had accomplished in past centuries. Many Muslims know that there was a time when Islamic civilization was at the forefront of almost every sphere of human activity. Their past convinces them that their religion will once again reach the pinnacle. It is partly because of their

civilizational memory that Muslims are persuaded that Islam is capable of addressing contemporary challenges.

At the same time however they are aware that their civilization has been vanquished. Ironically, defeat at the hands of the West was in a sense one of the factors that prompted Muslim scholars to visualize an 'Islamic State' as the antidote to Western colonial empires. It is significant that it was in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, as a result of both colonial military power and colonial intrigue, that the Muslim intellectual Mustafa Raziq introduced the term 'Islamic State' --- a term that has no precedent in Muslim history. It is worth noting in this regard that the community-cum-state that the Prophet established in Medina was not described as an 'Islamic polity'. The contemporary yearning for an 'Islamic state' is therefore—to a certain extent at least—a response to Western hegemony.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims, it should be reiterated, are attached to religion, and have been witness to its expanding role in present-day Asia.

It is better to examine islamic revivalism in three Muslim majority states with the same query in mind: what sort of role does religion play in Afghanistan, Indonesia and Iran?

Afghanistan

If there was a single event in contemporary Afghanistan that was decisive in shaping the relationship between religion and society, it was the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979. The invasion ignited the formation of a mass resistance movement that centred around Islam. The resisters, or freedom fighters (Mujahideen) saw themselves as defenders of the faith fighting an infidel army that was occupying their land. The label 'infidel' had an import of its own since the occupying army belonged to an atheistic state that espoused an atheistic ideology, namely, communism.

Though the majority of the freedom fighters were Afghans, there were also Muslims from dozens of other countries who regarded the liberation of Afghanistan as a 'jihad' (a struggle in the path of God). Their participation in the resistance was facilitated, it was alleged, by the CIA which provided both financial and logistical support. In fact, for the CIA and the US Administration the freedom fighters had to vanquish the Soviet army since Afghanistan was a critical battleground in the cold war between the US and the Soviet Union. After a 10-year-struggle, the Afghan resistance won. The Soviet army was defeated and shortly afterwards the cold war came to an end, climaxing in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It is not just in its implications for global politics and international relations that the Afghan resistance is historically significant. It also gave birth to a *transnational Muslim movement* with certain ideological characteristics. A commitment to liberation from occupation aside, sections of the movement were strongly influenced by *Wahabism*, a conservative, puritanical strain within Islam that originated in Arabia in the 18th century. Wahabism, in its present form, advocates a dogmatic adherence to the literal meaning of the Qur'anic text; relegates women to second class status; excludes non-Muslims from the protection of the state; and targets Shiites and Sufis as heretics. Wahabi dogmatism, needless to say, is antithetical to Islamic teachings.

Wahabism was disseminated through the Afghan resistance since numerous Muslim nationalities were involved in the struggle. Before Afghanistan, *Wahabism* was confined largely to Saudi Arabia. Once it was transformed into a transnational ideology, it developed an international constituency. But because its approach to Islam is exclusive and bigoted, *Wahabism* has tarnished the religion.

Though the present Afghan leadership is not Wahabist, Wahabi thinking is still pervasive within Afghan society. The Taliban for instance which was part of the resistance to Soviet occupation and ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 when it was ousted by US and NATO forces, subscribes to *Wahabism*. Today, it constitutes the core of the resistance to US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan. By casting itself as a resister, the Taliban has acquired a degree of credibility. Similarly, Osama bin Laden, the head of al-Qaeda, and the alleged mastermind behind the 9-11 episode, is also, from all accounts, a *Wahabist*. He was closely associated with the Taliban leadership when it was in power. Since he is viewed as an ardent opponent of US global hegemony he too commands a constituency and is perceived as a credible leader in certain circles. It is obvious that it is resistance to hegemony and occupation that provides a veneer of legitimacy to *Wahabism*.

Afghanistan's significance to the contemporary Muslim world and global politics is tied to these two phenomena. One it has emerged as the arena of resistance to first Soviet occupation with its communist ideology and now to US-NATO occupation with its *unstated* goal of safeguarding global capitalism. Two, it is from the Afghan resistance that a distorted and perverted notion of Islam in the form of *Wahabism* has spread to other parts of the Muslim world.

Indonesia

Indonesia shares with Afghanistan a long and intimate historical relationship with Islam. Islamic movements played a pivotal role in the struggle against Dutch colonial rule. After Independence in 1945, one of the most hotly debated issues was the role that Islam would play in building a nation ninety percent of whose population was Muslim. Though a section of the elite wanted the shariah as the basis of the new Indonesian state, the founding fathers eventually settled for a vision of the nation that was not linked to any particular religion. The Panca Sila—Five Principles—was accepted as the nation's ideology, with belief in the one God as the first principle. Islam, together with Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism and Protestantism were adopted as official religions. (Confucianism has now been added to the list).

Whatever the constitutional structure, at the level of the masses, political parties with an Islamic orientation proved to be immensely popular. In the 1955 parliamentary election for instance, the Masjumi and the Nahdatul Ulama (NU), together with a smaller Islamic party commanded more votes than the nationalist or communist parties. The Masjumi in particular presented a contemporary interpretation of Islam which emphasised social justice and freedom and appealed to a broad cross-section of the populace.

However the Indonesian President, Sukarno, and the vested interests that backed him were afraid that the Masjumi would undermine their position and sought to curb its influence. The party was banned in 1960. Then in 1965, right-

wing generals in the powerful Indonesian armed forces staged a bloody coup which marginalised not only progressive Islamic elements but also the Indonesian communists and nationalists. Sukarno himself was overthrown. The coup had the strong support—perhaps even the active collaboration—of the CIA and the US government.

The post coup President, General Suharto, was determined to ensure that Islamic parties had no role in 'the new order'. Islamic organisations were only allowed to undertake social and cultural activities—under state surveillance. Consequently, Islamic grassroots programmes flourished giving rise to powerful mass social movements like the restructured NU and the Muhammadiyyah. Since they were prohibited from seeking political power, both these movements—NU with 40 million members and the Muhammadiyyah with 35 million—focused upon strengthening universal Islamic values and principles at the grassroots, and in the process, helped to transform popular understanding of, and approaches towards, the religion.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, and the restoration of democratic processes, a plethora of political parties have re-emerged. The vast majority of the 48 parties that participated in the 1999 legislative election and the 24 parties that took part in the 2004 election did not commit themselves to shariah rule or the imposition of the Islamic penal code, or hudud, as most political parties elsewhere that claim to be ideologically orientated towards Islam tend to do. The few that espoused an explicit Islamic programme fared badly in the two polls. In fact, the top five performers in 1999 and 2004 sought to present Islam —with varying degrees of emphasis—as a universal, inclusive and accommodative faith that is in line with economic development and social change.

If there is any support for shariah and hudud it is in certain districts and provinces, such as Acheh. The Islamic laws that have been implemented in these places seem to revolve around personal and sexual morality. There is also of course a fringe within the Indonesian Muslim community that has resorted to violence in pursuit of its Islamic agenda. Needless to say, the overwhelming majority of Indonesian Muslims reject the politics of violence and terror, as demonstrated in a number of elections and opinion polls since 1998.

This does not mean that the situation will not change in the future. If economic disparities are not resolved, or if corruption becomes more serious, or if there is political chaos, it is not inconceivable that a less flexible, more rigid approach to Islam will gain more adherents. After all, it was because of economic turmoil and political instability in the late nineties that some Muslim groups turned to political terror.

The global environment is also bound to impact upon the attitudes of Indonesian Muslims. It is significant that almost all the terrorists convicted in the Bali bombing of October 2002 cited the injustices perpetrated by the US and Israel against Muslims in the Middle East—especially the plight of the Palestinians—as one of the principal reasons why they had sought radical solutions. Often, it is through the interplay of domestic and global factors—one reinforcing the other—that despair, frustration and anger reach a crescendo and lead to violence.

Iran

There are similarities and dissimilarities between Indonesia and Iran in their relationship to Islam. Iran owes a monumental debt to Islamic civilisation which more than any other civilisation has shaped Iranian society in the last thousand years or so. In defending Iranian sovereignty and independence against Western encroachments (Iran never became a formal colony of any Western power) in the early part of the twentieth century, Islam and Muslim religious elites played a significant role. At the same time however the suppression of Islamic movements by the Iranian monarch, Shah Pahlavi, in the sixties and seventies was much more severe and brutal than what transpired in Indonesia.

It was partly because the suppression was so severe that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was so popular. While Islamic groups were at the core, the Revolution brought together a whole spectrum of dissident movements including communists, socialists, liberals and secular nationalists. Even among the Islamic groups there was considerable diversity. The most important were the traditional religious elites led by Ayatollah Khomeini --- the leader of the Revolution itself. There was also an Islamic group with a liberal-democratic orientation associated with Mehdi Bazargan, the first Prime Minister after the Revolution. A third group with a Left outlook was inspired by the speeches and writings of Ali Shariati.

Within 5 or 6 years, the traditional elites had succeeded in establishing total control over power and politics. How did this happen? Part of the explanation is linked to Khomeini's role as the dominant, charismatic leader of the Revolution who was revered by the entire nation. But there were other reasons too. The traditional religious elites evoked a lot of sympathy from the people when some of their leading lights were assassinated allegedly by secular Left elements. As a group they were better organised, more focused on their ultimate goals, and most of all, commanded tremendous grassroots respect, compared to other actors in the Revolution. There was also an important external factor that helped the traditional religious elites to consolidate their power. Because Iraq under Saddam Hussein went to war against Iran without any provocation whatsoever in 1980, the Iranian people began to feel that they were under siege and that the values and identity of a unique Islamic revolution were in jeopardy. What aggravated this feeling was the wholehearted support that a number of Arab kingdoms and republics extended to Iraq. The US and other Western powers were also determined to ensure that Saddam defeated and destroyed the nascent Islamic republic. Financial and military assistance were made available to the Iraqi side by the US and some of its allies. Even the Soviet Union was more inclined towards the Iraqi leadership partly because of the latter's secular, Baathist socialist orientation. Attacked from all sides, the Iranian people—as it happens very often in other similar situations—became even more supportive of the traditional religious elites at the core of the national leadership. They were perceived as the only ones who could be relied upon to defend Iranian identity and integrity.

It is true that the traditional religious elites were resolute in their defence of the integrity and sovereignty of the Islamic revolution and nation. Given the magnitude of the external threats against Iran and the immensity of the domestic challenges to the leadership in the eighties, it is remarkable that the elites—and the people at large—succeeded in protecting the Revolution. The religious elites

also introduced significant changes to the economy from nationalising oil to redistributing incomes to strengthening rural cooperatives and welfare foundations which were all aimed at achieving a more just and equitable social order. At the same time however, power became more centralised in the hands of the religious elites especially since the Constitution itself allowed for a Supreme Leader to supervise all executive, legislative and even judicial functions aided by a council of eminent jurists, the Wilayat-al-Faqih. What this centralisation of power meant was that in the ultimate analysis the elected President and the elected Legislature (the Majlis) were subservient to a religious supremo and to an elite religious stratum.

The adverse consequences of this centralisation of power, in effect religious authoritarianism, were felt in almost every sphere of society. Dissent was circumscribed and survived only on the sufferance of the religious elite. Accountability was observed more in its breach than its adherence. Corruption became more entrenched. Women were subjected to a variety of restrictions and regulations pertaining to their attire and to their public and political roles. Controls were also imposed upon inter-gender interaction and socialisation. There were also curbs upon those cultural and artistic expressions that were deemed antithetical to Islam and the Revolution.

It was because of increasing religious authoritarianism that a reform movement of sorts was born which sought to demonstrate that Islam is opposed to dictatorship and cherishes freedom and individual liberties. The end of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988 and the death of Khomeini the following year provided some scope for Islamic reformist thinking. Iranian youth who constitute a huge slice of the population and women propelled this movement forward culminating in the election of a reform minded cleric, Mohamad Khatami, as president of the republic in 1997. He was re-elected in 2001. Khatami relaxed some of the controls upon the print media, provided more latitude for film-makers and television producers and encouraged the growth of independent civil society groups. But he could not make much headway. The authoritarian religious elites who felt threatened by his reforms stymied his moves. A high level of unemployment— almost 14 percent of the workforce had no jobs—and a woefully inadequate delivery system also dented Khatami's credibility.

From 2002, the US Administration abetted by the Israeli government also increased pressure upon the Khatami leadership. In his State of the Union message in January of that year, President George Bush described Iran as part of 'an axis of evil' for allegedly colluding with terrorists and for its nuclear ambitions. Indeed, the US-led targeting of Iran's nuclear programme which the Washington and Tel Aviv are convinced is designed to manufacture nuclear weapons—a charge which Tehran has strenuously denied—has strengthened the hand of religious authoritarians who had always been contemptuous of Khatami's openness and his willingness to dialogue with the West.

This was reflected in the 2005 presidential election which brought to the fore the hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmednejad. He was perceived by the Iranian masses as someone who had the guts to stand up to the US and Israel in a situation where dialogue and engagement with the US and the West—they felt—would jeopardise Iranian sovereignty. It is a matter of some significance that as the US

and Israeli governments become more bellicose towards Iran, the support for religious elites and others who are seen as capable of protecting the Iranian nation has increased right across the board while the popularity of reformers like Khatami has diminished considerably.

Iran underscores two important characteristics of the Muslim world today. One, in Iran as in so many other contemporary Muslim societies, a struggle is going on between authoritarian often conservative religious groups with an exclusive outlook on the one hand and democratically inclined, reform oriented Islamic groups with an inclusive, universal approach on the other. Two, when the US, Israel or some of their other allies pursue their self-serving agendas vis-a-vis certain Muslim countries, it is often the authoritarian groups that benefit from their interference and manipulation to the detriment of the reform oriented elements.

The role of religion in Asia at this juncture of history is far more complex than what the mainstream media suggests. This complexity is related to a large extent to the re-emergence of religion as an important player in the public arena. □□□