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POINT OF VIEW

Sinai to Sindh: The Battle for Muslim

Iftikhar H. Malik *

Egypt's biggest mass slayings, committed in a mosque in northern Sinai on 24 November during the Friday congregational prayers, have once again underlined the urgency to locate the causes of this by now rather familiar self-immolation across several Muslim regions. With 305 worshippers including 27 children dead and 135 seriously wounded as a result of an orchestrated bombing and shootings from close proximity by at least thirty perpetrators presumably with some ISIS affiliation, one is certainly flabbergasted at the meticulous and no less gruesome planning of a grievous tragedy.¹

Exactly two years back, in November 2015, the downing of the Russian airliner by the ISIS with 224 fatalities on board was hitherto deemed to be the biggest of such terrorist attacks, which seem to have gained more intensity and frequency since General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ousted President Muhammad Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood in a street-led showdown in 2014.² Morsi, though in power only for a year following anti-Mubarak demonstrations in Tahrir Square, was partly betrayed by the lack of his own programmatic alternatives for a democratic Egypt and partly his own ill-placed enthusiasm for Islamisation proved the last proverbial straw for a short-lived elected government.

The governability dilemma owing to an imbalance between the raised expectations and institutional roadblocks had quickly disheartened both the liberal and moderate elements allowing a rather prompt re-entry into power by Egypt's formidable khaki establishment. Morsi was conveniently blamed for pushing polity to a more fundamentalist strand, and following some violent skirmishes, Sisi, until recently a Morsi loyalist, ensconced himself in the presidential office that had once been the abode of past uniformed presidents like Gamal Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Initially, the incumbent general-president retained the support from liberal opinion groups yet his overthrow of an elected government, wider use of oppression against the Muslim Brotherhood and then closer mutuality both with Israel and Saudi Arabia ensured a backlash by a motley of anti-Sisi Islamist opponents. The intermittent attacks on

*Iftikhar H. Malik is Professor of History at Bath Spa University and among his several studies on South Asian history, and Muslim Diaspora communities, his recent most work, *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics in Southwest Asia*, was published by Anthem Press in 2016.

Coptic churches and country's tourist resorts by pro-ISIS elements only exposed official vulnerabilities when it came to the security of multiple soft targets. Whether the latest atrocity on the peninsula was committed by the Salafis targeting Sufis with the latter often being accused of timid syncretism betraying Islamic purism, or was it meant to embarrass General Sisi's regime in view of his admonitions, still remains a moot point.

Undoubtedly, the post-2001 violence claiming an undiminished pound of Muslim flesh received an impetus from the Western invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya which further aggravated the situation on the ground due to President Obama's ever-ascendant campaign of drone attacks on seven Muslim countries. However, the spate of violence is also owed to the fact that many Muslim clusters are faced with the serious issues of identity crises, pervasive disempowerment, and a persistent sense of hurt and loss that dates from the colonial times and has not been redressed during the national phase. Demographically speaking, here the youth bulge itself vulnerable to anti-Western rhetoric—sometimes not without fuller justification—is consistently confronted by a rather stale instruction given out both by the state schools and seminaries that does not fully help it acquire needed intellectual and professional wherewithal in a highly competitive world. Corruption, coercion and misgovernance at the state level only push these disillusioned youths towards militancy often akin to death cultism. Younger men from broken families and dysfunctional educational systems find themselves in blind alleys, and fed with hatred become both the perpetrators and victims of this abysmal despondency that pervades Afro-Asian horizons. Awareness of better and more prosperous 'heavens' elsewhere—and not in their own abodes—owing to proliferation of social media further feeds into this wider malaise.

Ethnic and doctrinal pluralism among Muslims is both a reality and dire challenge that has for quite some time been spawning volatility though if handled and understood rather judiciously, it could also augur fresh opportunities for peace, dialogue and coexistence. Certainly, the literalists and purists from amongst the Muslims since the early colonial era have proffered their reductionist solution by shunning syncretic values and practices that the Sufis have practised since the early era but surely more so ever since the Mongol invasions and the Crusades. Sufism may have its own lacunae especially when some of its adherents seek recourse to more fatalistic attitudes towards mundane issues, but it has also given us classical masterpieces of literature, sublime music, splendid architecture and unstinted celebration of humanity over and above class or creed based schisms. Reading *Ali Hujviri's Kashful Mahjoob*³—the earliest treatise on Sufism by the patron saint of Lahore—and *Mevlana Rumi's Masnawi'* and certainly the quartets of *Omar Khayyam*⁵, or *The Conference of the Birds* by Fariduddin Attar are as soothing today as they were during their own troubled times. Without shunning the dignity of existence and trust in humanity, Muslim Sufis overcame some of the direst problems faced by their communities and thus there is a strong reason to seek some sustenance from Sufi heritage.

Historically, it is true that despite commonalities in roots and aspirations, somehow Islam's orthodox and esoteric strands often traversed parallel paths, and like tensions between the rationalists and conformists and dissension between Sunnis and Shias, here again divergences occasionally proved taxing for Muslim laity. Since 1979, following the Iranian revolution, the ultra-Wahhabi attack on Kaaba and the wider glorification of anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan added new vigour and velocity into this Sufi-Salafi neologism. Ever increasing geopolitical spotlight on Muslims across the globe and populist forces seeking Muslim blood have also replenished these parallel paths within the Islamic discourse and thus the shared Muslim quest for identity, peace and security gets sundered. The traumatic developments since 9/11 have only accentuated the divide though it was hastily assumed as if only the literalist Salafis of Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab and Boko Haram varieties were the main trouble makers while Sufis were posited as "good Muslims", or even politically toothless. But competition for community leadership, the partisan role along with grievances assuming a holistic Muslim dimension also inducted some followers of Sufi Islam into diehard ventures.

In this sordid history, retrospectively, 2010 has turned out to be a decisive turning point. Other than the resurgence of the Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line, Iraq entered one of the most existential-

ist phases in Sunni-Shia relationship. The situation assumed horrid dimensions with Baghdad coming under the Shia control with the former Baathists and Al-Qaeda elements morphing into the ISIS. The scuttling of Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria and Bahrain, unlike responsive changes in Tunisia, further exacerbated communal fragmentation all the way from the Indus regions to Mali. It was in 2010, that a suicide attack at the tomb of Ali Hujviri awoke Pakistanis to a bitter realisation that their fundamentalist coreligionists had crossed the red line by attacking the shrine and the mosque of the pioneer Sufi-Saint. Similar attacks on Sufi shrines in Peshawar, Karachi and Quetta followed until on 16 February 2017, Shahbaz Qalandar's tomb in Sindh's Sehwan Sharif witnessed an unparalleled bloodletting where orchestrated suicide attacks by Sunni extremists claimed 72 lives along with 300 casualties.⁶ A shrine visited by millions of Muslims of all persuasions besides Hindus, Sikhs and Christians paying homage to a great humanist writer and the leading voice of the downtrodden in lower Sindh became a vortex of blood and flesh. It is only as a postscript to these large-scale attacks on shrines that the followers of Sufi Islam in Pakistan, often called Brelvis, too began to organise themselves and in November 2017, while asserting their street power, laid a sustained and no less daring siege to the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.⁷ Pakistan's "merchants of hate", like their counterparts elsewhere, were being led by emotional rhetoricians and clerics who felt no qualms in freezing millions of lives through their siege of focal points in metropolitan territory while the state machinery simply bided for time.

Tragic events in South Asia and North Africa claiming innocent lives and those too in places of worship such as the mosques, shrines and cemeteries could be a new phase in bloodletting and self-flagellation but they could also be a time when forces of state and civil society may be compelled to take a dire stock of "what has gone wrong". Christopher De Bellaigue, in his recent volume, reminds us of brilliant Muslim efforts during the nineteenth century to ingratiate with the modernist exigencies, and their opportunist sundering by the colonialist machinations.⁸ Earlier on, Mustafa Akoyal ventured deeper into Muslim history to highlight the need for restorative efforts for rationalist primacy over and above obscurantism.⁹ Certainly, there is no simple or singular solution to this malaise, yet given its multiple and no less harrowing aspects, Muslim intelligentsia and leadership—more than anyone else—will have to rise to the occasion to reassess the dire situation. Here tackling clerical dogmatism and stalemated issues of sectarianism, evolution of youth-centred development schemes, overhauling of educational systems of all kinds and harbouring a substantive spirit of regionalisation among the post-colonial states can certainly help alleviate agonising waste of human lives and heritage.

R E F E R E N C E S

All links accessed on November 27, 2017

1. Some of the attackers reportedly carried ISIS's flags. The Observer, 27 November 2017.
2. BBC, "Russian Plane Crash: What We Know", 17 November 2015: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34687990>
3. Ali Hajveri (1009-1077) was bot in Ghazni and migrated to Lahore where he completed the first-ever study on Sufism. Based on parables and classical Islamic teaching, the book is the pioneer study on a strand within Islam, which allowed it to reach people in China, Africa and Southeast Asia. For details see, Ali B. Uthman AHujwiri, *The Kashf alMahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufiism*, translated nu Reynold A. Nicholson, London: Luzac & Co. 1936.
4. Jalal ud Din Rumi (1207-1273), an Afghan Sufi buried in Konya, is known for his poetic works, especially Masnawi where human soul, with all its challenges and dynamics, is seen as a divine extension eager to leave body to reconnect with the super soul. Rumi, like other Sufi masters, allowed music and whirling dances to let people celebrate humanity as well as divinity. See, Coleman Barks, *Rumi: Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 2004.
5. Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), a great Persian classicist, was in fact founder of Algebra. Edward FitzGerald, *Rub'aiy'a't of Omar Khayyam*, edited by Daniel Karlin, Oxford, 2010.
6. The Independent, 16 February 2017: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/sehwan-shrine-bombing-latest-suicide-attack-pakistan-sufi-muslim-worshippers-lal-shahbaz-qalandar-a7583986.html>
7. Zahid Hussain, "Flames of Bigotry", Dawn, 22 November 2017: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1372094/the-flames-of-bigotry>
8. Christopher De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Modern Struggle between Faith and Reason*, London: 2017.
9. Mustafa Akoyal, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, New York, 2013.