

The Role of Political Islam in the Revitalization of the Somali State

.....So, the question is not whether or not political Islam would have a role of the future of Somalia, but what kind of political Islam (considering the various shades of the phenomenon) would it be?

In the case of Somalia, I would hypothesize that when the dust settles down and all situational factors-- namely external threats-- are defused, there will flourish parties (of various shades) that would put their faith in the center stage of their political platform.

Because, Islam offers two things that clanism does not:

- 1) Unifying common identity***
- 2) Trust***

With the terrorist attacks of Sept 11th, 2001, the political discourse in the West and across the globe vis-à-vis Islam in the broader sense and political Islam in particular became profoundly slanted. As a result, three perceptions became widely accepted: First, that political Islam (like the way some perceive Islam itself) is monolithic. Second, that political Islam is (like some say of Islam itself) is inherently violent. Third, that Islam and politics are as safe as mixing fuel with fire. It is through this tainted binocular and preconceived attitude that political Islam is examined.

Objective analysis of political Islam is direly scarce, and one may even argue it is stifled in the market place of ideas, primarily by paranoia and Islamophobia.

** In the last decade or so, many books, articles, and researches were dedicated to what could perhaps be considered the most intriguing, emotively polarizing, and controversial phenomenon in the 21- century. And while there is ample literature available, most tend to approach this critical issue from the Huntingtonian vantage point- that political Islam is an immanent danger threatening Western values, security, and geopolitical interest.

So, in order to objectively decipher this phenomenon, it is profoundly important to understand the negative perception that the term “political Islam” connotes or triggers. In the West, more specifically in the U.S., political Islam= radicalism= Islamism = terrorism = extremism = = fundamentalism = jihadism = shariatocracy = Islamo-fascism and a host of other demonizing adjectives.

** In the U. S. , there seems to exist a spontaneous knee-jerk reaction to the term. There is a profoundly irrational fear associated with it- a mindset that triggers a fight or flight reaction.

** How did this image develop?1) The propaganda machine (what David Brock calls, the Noise Machine) over 1200 talk radio shows by Clear Channel, numerous Rubert Murdock owned TV stations, publications, think tanks, etc.

The Political Noise Machine’s Success in Demonizing Any and All Things Islamic:

- *Essentialist terrorist] Professor Ali Khan*

- 2) The T-Fear (fear being associated, accused, or labeled with the T-word)
- 3) Real extremist actions and attitudes committed by a few Muslims in the periphery of the main stream
- 4) Absence of 'the other side of the story'

Political Islam:

While there is no widely accepted definition of the term, there seems to be a widely espoused perception that political Islam cannot produce anything but evil.

To some political Islam is “a term used to denote a set of political ideologies holding that Islam is not solely a religion, but also a political system where Islamic law is the basis of ...all statutory laws of society, and that Muslims must return to the original teachings and the early models of Islam”. It is the apparatus used by “Islamists” who violently opposed to the encroachment of ‘Western’ military, economic, political, social, and cultural influence or occupation on the Muslim world.”

To others, term “political Islam” is very loaded; hence, the term itself is political. In their perspective, Islam is a comprehensive way of life, and as such is not devoid of politics. However, especially since 9/11, this understanding of Islam is the very “ideology” that the propaganda or what David Brock aptly dubbed “the noise machine” has effectively succeeded in making it The Enemy (The green menace that replaced the red one of the communist bloc.)

Yet, there are those others who define political Islam as the belief "...that the Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet (what the Prophet said and did during his lifetime in an effort to apply his best understanding of the Qur'an) have something important to say about the way politics and society should operate..."

** In this paper, I would define political Islam as the vision, mission, objectives, and goals of any apparatus, militant or otherwise, that includes Islam in its political platform. In this case, political Islam could be either good or bad. But, to some, they are convinced that it cannot produce but bad. And, it is in this environment, the ICU came to power.

THE LETTER:

It is the preconceived negative perception associated with Islamists around the world that ultimately led to the muffling ICU's outreach letter to the West.

International Terrorism:

1) Somalia is a homogenous society, and any outsiders can be spot immediately. We are Muslim 100%, speak the same language and have cultural heritage that is very hard to understand for outsiders. We have a complex clan based system that is not easy for non-Somali to understand, let alone hide in the country. We categorically deny and reject any accusation that we are harboring any terrorists or supporters of terrorism in the areas where the courts operate.

2) We also confirm that our goals and objectives are to establishment law and order in our country and free our people from oppression.

3) We share no objectives, goals or methods with groups that sponsor or support terrorism. We have no foreign elements in our courts, and we are simply here because of the need of the community we serve.

4) We invite the International Community to visit the area where the court operates and see for themselves if there are any terrorists elements being harbored or living in this area. We commit ourselves and our clan elders to this position: to be open and honest in order to spare the Somali people the violence and the suffering being perpetrated by the warlords. We have nothing to hide from the international community and we strongly believe that, once they realize what we do and what we have achieved, they will support our initiative and efforts to bring peace and stability to Somalia.

5) There is also the accusation that we intend to establish an anti-US and Western government in Somalia. This is not true. Such an agenda is against our objectives and goals since this would contradict our wish for there to be a peaceful Somalia. This falsehood is being fabricated to get support from US Government by groups who have terrorized the people of this country for the last 16 years.

6) We want create an environment that could enable our people to decide their future.

We want the Somali people to decide which form of governance they want and choose their leaders for the first time in decades.

We would like to summarize our goals and objectives as follows:

1) To establish a system of governance in Mogadishu, and remove all the checkpoints and terror points that the warlords have set up and disarm all criminal elements that endanger the peace in the city;

2) We want to contribute to the rebuilding of our country and create a peaceful environment and a country that is at peace with itself, and with its neighbors and with the international community.

3) To rehabilitate and rebuild all the city infrastructures specially those that belong to the city governments, including its sea ports, airports, road, bridges, schools, hospitals, universities and have committees of the intellectuals running and operating of these facilities;

4) We would like to establish a friendly relationship with the international community that is based on mutual respect and interest and seek their support for the Somali peace process and respect their desire for peace.

5) We seek support for our communities who have been denied all the basic human needs such as security, liberty and development as accepted universally and in accordance to the human rights laws;

We thank you in advance for your kind patience, understanding and support

Shiekh Sharif

The ICU Legacy and lessons learned:

- 1) With the right environment actors and timing, peace in Somalia is not an unfathomable proposition
- 2) Introspective capacity is in short supply
- 3) Neither emotional thinking nor moral self-righteousness mix with politics. The old Turkish proverb says “Measure a thousand times and cut only once” also, never forget that there should not be compulsion in religion “*Laa ikraaha fi addiin.*”
- 4) What can be negotiated should never be demanded by force
- 5) Extremism in all its forms is (ultimately) self-defeating
- 6) Contextual understanding of the international political realities and the diplomatic skills to negotiate pragmatic arrangements are existentially imperative.

Does Political Islam Lead to Insecurity and Increase Terrorism?

There is no evidence indicating that political Islam leads to insecurity. It is extremism, not political Islam that threatens security and increases terrorism [the Tamil Tigers,

according to Robert Pape, are the leading terrorists. And they happen to be Marxists].

Extremists are found in all religious and secularist movements.

Alternative Policy Recommendations:

- 1) Regime change does not solve all political problems (and if Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia are the indication of its effectiveness, that approach is a recipe to failure.)
- 2) Playing the role of the even-handed broker is essential to the credibility of the U.S. foreign policy
- 3) Taking a constructivist approach, and investing on civil societies to build schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and resource centers for peace-building and good governance.

**** So, what is likely to come out of this unlikely transformatory experience?**

In due course, even whatever the TFG ultimately morphs into would most likely accept the reality that their credibility would hinge on their connection to Islam.

Therefore, it should not surprise no one to see genuine or artificial Islamic political parties proliferating across Somalia.

Within these parties, only those that are coalition-based Islamic parties would have a chance to survive. And, in order to sustain their survivability and become more effective, these parties would have to have certain pragmatic characteristics:

- 1) They would demonstratively toil to plow the field for an environment conducive to building a win-win security condition.
- 2) They will avoid becoming puritanical (they would be more inclusive; they would allow women participation and take incremental approach to reform,)
- 3) They will promote rational nationalism (neither transnational nor irredentist)
- 4) They will be more objective and compromising (Constitution of Medina and the Treaty of Al-Hudaibiah)
- 5) They will uphold diplomacy and build consensus and alliances with non-Islamists