

## Issues/Discussion Forum

### Arabisation of Islam in Asia: A clash within civilization

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The spate of terrorist attacks and the attendant violence witnessed in the last couple of months, including the recent attacks in Dhaka, Kishoreganj and Ektarpur in Bangladesh, and Nice in France, brings home the truth that something perverse is happening within Islam and Muslims alone can fight that scourge.

Analysts attribute the growth of Islamist radicalism to Muslim grievances about their culture and way of life not being given what they consider their rightful place in their own societies; transnational links with organisations like Al-Qaeda and now an even more dangerous phenomenon called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or *Daesh*; hostility towards the policies of the West, in particular the United States and its support of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians, the occupation of Iraq and now intervention in Syria; and opposition to crackdowns on domestic militancy like in Bangladesh.

These factors have, undoubtedly, contributed to a sense of growing alienation and feeling of victimisation and oppression among certain Muslim groups, and to an attempt to redress their grievances and frustrations through violence and terror.

More importantly, a fundamental transformation is taking place within the Muslim community all over the world - an identity formation based on a world view taken from early Quranic precepts and a code of conduct resembling a way of life that was prevalent in the Arab world in the mediaeval period during the formative stage of Islam.

This form of identity is premised on an understanding and belief that to be a true Muslim, one has to be different from "others" in every aspect of life and that there cannot be a meeting ground between Islam and other religions. Adaptation to other customs, traditions and cultures in its path towards the expansion of the religion had only led to aberration and

corruption of original and pristine ideas of Islam. It is only through the practice of mediaeval Arab traditions and way of life that the evil eyes of other religions can be kept at bay.

Such an exclusivist world view may not be the most predominant among the Muslims of the world yet, but is surely gaining slow and steady ground. The external manifestation is the wearing of Middle Eastern clothes by men and women. Strict observance of fundamentalist Islam is also a means of asserting identification with reform and protesting against upper-class corruption in many societies, which might somewhat explain the fundamentalists' prescription for an austere way of life free from temptations and pleasures.

Since the first Muslims were mostly Arab, everything associated with them - their culture, names, and family structures - has been associated with Islam, even though the vast majority of Muslims today are not Arabs. The *niqab* ( face-veil) was rarely seen outside the Arab world until most recently. Most Muslims see the niqab as a by-product of Arab culture. The practice of wearing veils can be traced from a Quranic prescription given at the time of Rasullulah, who saw Arab women wearing veils - not due to any religious motives but rather due to the harsh and dusty desert climate - but leaving their bosoms wide open. He then urged the women "to wear their veils over their bosoms" for modesty, but this was not necessarily a particular dress code. It is only recently that the veil has been interpreted as religiously authentic, instead of a cultural expression, and therefore a must for all Muslim women.

Arabisation and Islamisation are inseparable parts of a single cultural ideal that now pervades the Arab world. In their drive towards authentication and uniformisation of Islam, the transmitters (Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries) and the recipients (non-Arab Islamic societies) are equally emphasising "Arabisation" as the norm of the pure and ideal form of Islam to be followed by Muslims all over the world.

The Hadith, or records of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, is the basis for the development of notions of syariah (Islamic law) that are heavily influenced by early and mediaeval Arab cultural norms.

Arabisation poses a threat to all Muslims who believe in Islam's divine character and universalism, and can be combated only by them.

It is not a crisis between civilisations as Samuel Huntington noted, but a crisis within civilisation, and it needs to be fought from within.

Arabisation's major appeal emanates from Islam's millenary expectations and the unfounded utopia of a just and prosperous society under Islamic rule. This is also fed by the silence of the moderates in the face of the more vocal minority trying to hijack Islam for their perverted gain.

Christianity has passed through this phase and the contradictions between the sacred and the profane were resolved by separating the Church from the State during the period of renaissance and reformation.

If the powerful, modern ideas of "jihadi" Islamism are not met in the marketplace of ideas with an equally vigorous, contemporary articulation of peaceful, syncretic and inclusive Islam, then "the centre of gravity" of public discourse will inevitably slide towards those ideas that appear most powerful and relevant to the modern world.

The progressive interpretation of Islam developed by the late Nurcholish Madjid and former president Abdurrahman Wahid in Indonesia, Anwar Ibrahim and Dr Chandra Muzaffar in Malaysia, Dr Surin Pitsuwan, the former secretary-general of Asean, in Thailand, and progressive intellectuals from India and Bangladesh, represent a powerful alternative to "jihadi" Islamism.

The need of the hour for Muslims in Asia is to de-Arabise Islam from its exclusivist mould and promote a more inclusive Islam based on their own indigenous cultures and traditions blending with the universal message of Islam, as was the case in Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Bangladesh in the period before the inroads made by the Islam of the desert.

There is also an urgent need for the moderates to break their deafening silence against the tyranny of the small minority who are bringing shame and a bad name to the religion, and shed their inertia and fear of being branded as not "good Muslims" by the perverted radical minority.

In this project, Indonesia and India, the two largest Muslim countries in the world, can make a positive contribution in projecting their composite culture manifested in Borobudur and Prambanan in the former and Ajmer Dargah Sharif and Fatehpur Sikri in the latter.

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*-(Courtesy : The Strait Times, July, 19, 2016)*

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