

Islam, Nonviolence, and National Transformation

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THE CONCEPT OF UMMAH

A historical approach to the relationship of Islam and nonviolence in the light of national transformation necessitates the “proper” understanding of the social form used for that purpose by Muslims throughout their history. Without defining conclusively what is meant by “national transformation,” it can be said here that the main social form used to effect changes by Muslims is the concept of *ummah*, the Muslim community per se. Over the course of several centuries, this concept has developed into different social institutions, such as the “caliphate” [*khalifah*] and the “sultanate,” and has even emerged as the ideal “Islamic society” consistently formulated by modern Muslim thinkers from Al-Afghani to Sayyid Qutb and Al-Maududi.

But history shows that the concept of *ummah* has at times been quite specific, while at others it has remained more general. In the early stages of the Islamic community’s life it connoted a relatively small community of believers adhering completely to Islamic teachings as formulated by the Prophet. Following soon after these early stages its meaning developed into that of a world community, an *oikoumene* of nations with a rich legacy reaching back to various previous civilizations. This concept of *ummah* was, and still is, how historians conceive of “imamate” [*imamah*] or “caliphate.” This consciousness of being part of a large, universal Islamic community was the supporting elan of this concept.

Later, during colonial rule, the term *ummah* denoted a much narrower meaning: that of being part of a racial unit, ethnic group, or cultural entity, and was used in such phrases as the *ummah* of Arabs [*‘ummah ‘arabiyyah*], as witnessed by the emergence of

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kampung Arab (Arab towns) in many Southeast Asian cities. After independence, the meaning of *ummah* became limited once again. It denoted membership in formal Islamic movements, as in the term widely used here, *Ummat Islam Indonesia*.

Currently these various connotations are used in an overlapping way, resulting in many misunderstandings among fellow Muslims. In this chapter *ummah* is used in a geographical sense to connote the concept of the twentieth century “nation-state.” Since the object of this discussion is not the meaning of the word *ummah* itself, but rather how it transforms nations, its use in the “nation-state” sense is seen as appropriate here.

NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

National transformation, or “national development,” is currently a great challenge to “nation-states” in Muslim countries. These countries face seemingly intractable problems in containing massive expressions of communalism and maintaining national integration gained after long and bitter struggles and severe hardships. Difficulties also abound in establishing the rule of law, in building economic frameworks for equitable distribution of wealth, and in cementing social cohesion. Government response to these difficulties varies from place to place, but mainly takes the form of technocratic sociopolitical engineering, consolidation of the prevalent national ideology, and, in many cases, outright political suppression. There are a whole range of political devices used to prop up those responses, from limited restriction of individual and group political rights to blatant authoritarianism. The end result is a want of full freedom of expression for individuals. Thus the governments decide basic issues concerning the welfare of each respective country without sufficient consultation with the people. Social control becomes more and more difficult to exercise, and in the long run corrective measures are less and less possible to enact by the nation as a whole. Justice becomes more difficult to observe, and opportunities for violent acts by the rulers are more readily available.

PROBLEMS OF APPROACH, IDENTITY, AND CONTINUITY

In light of situations in which “nation-states” fail to curb their use of violence but rather make their own use of force easier, Islamic movements face immense obstacles, which can be characterized as the problems of approach, identity, and continuity.

The Problem of Approach

In struggling for social justice, equal treatment before the law, and freedom of expression, these movements must choose between a radical or gradual approach.

The Problem of Identity

They are also faced with the difficult choice between a pluralistic identity (such as “Indonesian Muslim nationalist” or “Arab Muslim socialist”) and a purely Islamic identity. Pluralistic identities risk making so many accommodations to other elements that in the end the unique Islamic aspect is lost and the identity even becomes non-Islamic. On the other hand, the monolithic tendency to reassert Islamic values only alienates these movements from the broader networks of citizens’ national coalitions. Isolated from those coalitions, Islamic movements will be seen as sectarian groups and will eventually develop their own sense of exclusion, which will result in factual sectarianism, if not outright separatism. The challenge at this time is to find an identity that will both develop a sense of belonging to Islam while also retaining a sense of belonging to a larger and wider network of groups motivated by world ideologies, other faiths, and global concerns.

The Problem of Continuity

Should these Islamic movements formulate their own “alternative development strategy” by pursuing low-key bottom-to-top participative strategies, or should they proclaim Islam as a definite alternative social plan to replace existing development plans? It is not easy to choose between the piecemeal and gradual process, on the one hand, and the more radical and holistic strategy on the other.

TWO ASPECTS OF NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

National transformation involves two aspects. First, there must be a change toward more distinct divisions of labor between different sectors of society. Such a change in social structures involves a fundamental change in the institutional relationship between the state and the individual citizen. Second, a change is needed in the social relationships among different strata of the society. These changes may be peaceful transformations or violent upheavals. Almost all Islamic movements are very concerned with this aspect and are willing to use whatever means are necessary to achieve such a change. This willingness to use violence will by necessity involve violence in their efforts. One act of violence begets further counterviolence and soon an uncontrollable escalation of violence ensues.

To avoid the possibility of such an escalation, with its never-ending specter of a war of annihilation, Islamic movements should dedicate themselves to nonviolence as a way to achieve their objectives. But how can these movements develop this attitude in the face of so much violence in their respective countries? They must begin by reconsidering how social change occurs—a process which is largely misunderstood by the rulers and the ruled alike. Often social institutions are pulled into diametrically opposed positions creating highly explosive polarizations.

The following two frameworks are offered in hopes of alleviating the aforementioned confrontational situations. Perhaps they can serve as a first step toward nonviolence.

(1) In countries where a formal Islamic state is difficult if not impossible to establish, Islam should play the role of the guarantor of human dignity through action programs to ensure the physical safety of individual citizens, their right to protect their family and descendants, the safety of their property, and fairness in their profession. The implementation of these guarantees could promote the spiritual and material well-being of the society. People's direct participation in the endeavor could be encouraged through the application of Islamic teachings as the social ethics of their respective nations. To pursue that objective, promotion of a bottom-to-top development strategy is necessary, including the

establishment of free associations to improve socioeconomic living standards as well as to foster sociopolitical rights of the disadvantaged sectors of the society, and to encourage mutual respect in interfaith relations. This framework has the decisive advantage of being capable of achieving its objectives within the current “nation-state” forms.

(2) The pursuance of national transformation should be put in a “national coalition” context with nonreligiously motivated groups, such as legal aid institutions, environmental groups, and associations to transfer appropriate technology to rural areas. This approach necessitates an inclusive attitude from the Islamic movements, stressing similarities rather than emphasizing differences in dealing with organizations motivated by faiths other than Islam. This is what constitutes the pluralistic sociocultural approach to democratization within the context of what Catholic theologians term a “human development” strategy.