

Issues/Discussion Forum

Is Secularism Incompatible with Islam and Vice Versa

- M. Adil Khan

In recent times there have been raging debates concerning secularism and Islam and many especially the protagonists of secularism argue that Islam is an antithesis to the very idea of secularism and that secularism which happens to be an integral component of democracy and democratic values, Islam is not. But is it?

This idea that Islam is inimical to secularism is prevalent not just in non-Muslim countries but in some Muslim majority countries as well, where in recent times steps have been taken to ban and/or minimize Islamic practices and rituals where these rituals have been in vogue for centuries especially on occasions such as Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting.

During Ramadan Muslims congregate to break their fasts and pray, at home and at mosques and sometime outside mosques, in public spaces. These are age-old practices. However, recently, in some Muslim majority countries, these practices have either been banned or are discouraged – all in the name of secularism.

But are these practices or more broadly, is secularism incompatible with Islam? Let us begin by defining and explaining secularism.

According to the Delhi University Professor of History, Romila Thapar, secularism implies, “the functioning of the universe and human society without involving divine intervention” and that “...secular does not deny religion, but at the same time does not give it primacy in the functioning of society.”

In other words, secularism is not a contra idea to religion. Secularism suggests that religion, any religion, should not be the governing parameter of societies and this is particularly crucial for those societies where a certain religion practices structured inequities through divine sanctions, and this is unacceptable.

Furthermore, like religion, secularism can become problematic, especially when the concept gets either misinterpreted or deliberately misconstrued to use it as a political tool to suppress political rivals that espouse and embrace Islam and Islamic identity as their political and ideological platform. As a matter of fact, this is already happening in a number of Muslim majority countries including Bangladesh where the vested interest misinterprets and misconstrues the concept to suit their own political mission where they seem to be using secularism to secure their political power by denigrating, marginalizing and suppressing the opposition who prefer Bangladesh's long Muslim history and heritages, to construct its unique and sovereign identity. In this regard, some have also argued that in Bangladesh the nexus of vested interest that uses the “secularism” card to suppress Islamist nationalism,

pleases its external patron, a non-Muslim de facto theocratic state that has made denial of equal rights to and persecution of its minority, the Muslim, its policy, and governance preference.

Nonetheless, it is important that we examine Islam and its position on religious tolerance or otherwise.

Islam

There is widespread belief that Islam is an intolerant religion, and that non-Muslims in a Muslim majority “Islamic” state are treated, as an aspect of its tenet, as second-class citizens.

How true is this notion? Is it true that Islam mandates to treat the non-Muslims in an Islamic state as second-class citizens? Let us explore.

In terms of inter-religious relationships and governance of societies in Islamic countries, Islam provides two guiding principles, and these are: (i) one, “*La kum di numkum walia din*” – your religion is to you, mine is to mine; and (ii) second, “*Insaaf*” -justness!

The first tenet, “*Lakum di...*” is clear and emphatic about peaceful religious co-existence and the second, *Insaaf* (justness) implies that irrespective of differences of caste, colour, creed and religion, societies must be governed, justly and fairly.

Indeed, when during the reign of Islam’s Second Caliph, Hazrat Omar (RA) his commanders spread out and conquered territory after territory that had non-Muslims as inhabitants, the conquering commanders sought from the Second Caliph his guidance as to how to govern these newly conquered territories whose inhabitants were non-Muslims, the Caliph said, “govern them with *Insaaf* (justness)” and they did.

Islam’s Caliph’s diktat of governance by the principle of “*Insaaf*” impressed the non-Muslims of these newly conquered territories so much that many voluntarily converted to Islam.

Indeed, Islam’s fast spread in its early days was mainly due to the application of the principle of *Insaaf* in governance, invoked by and during Hazrat Omar’s reign which also created a precedence for all Muslim majority/Islamic societies to follow.

In other words, if you believe in Islam and if you happen to oversee governance of a Muslim majority country, you must govern by the two of Islam’s core governing tenets, namely “*La kum di numkum walia din*” – mutual respect and tolerance to all religions and “*Insaaf*” – equal treatment of all, implying that there are no contradictions between secularism and Islam.

Now, one may ask, do we have practicing examples of compatibility between secularism and Islam or more generally, are there societies where people can fully preserve and practice their respective faiths, Islam or otherwise and not marginalized nor discriminated against nor persecuted because of their faiths?

Yes, there are. Examples of Nepal, a Hindu state and Uzbekistan, a Muslim state come to my mind.

Secularism/Religion Coexistence: The Examples of Nepal and Uzbekistan

Nepal

Nepal happens to be the only constitutionally decreed Hindu state in the world and a fine example of secularism and religion where Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists live peacefully with each other and practice their respective religions and rituals without any hindrance nor intimidation, neither from the government nor from people. Furthermore, in Nepal no religious group is given special favour nor are people denied their rights, because of their faiths.

Uzbekistan

The Muslim majority state, Uzbekistan where religion and secularism co-exist, that I visited recently is a good example to explore (<https://countercurrents.org/2019/07/my-recent-visit-to-uzbekistan-some-take-home-lessons-of-their-public-policies/>).

Until 1991 Uzbekistan, a country 93 million people of which 93% are Muslims was under the rule of communist Soviet Union. During the Soviet era many of Uzbekistan's Islamic practices were banned and Islamic relics and monuments were destroyed.

However, after separating and gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan has restored many of the Islamic practices, and rituals, albeit, in a regulated manner meaning that the Uzbeks made conscious decision to blend its dominant Islamic heritages with secular values which nonetheless are also Islamic values.

In Uzbekistan religious tolerance and mutual respect to each other's religion, is strictly enforced. For example, expressions, displays and/or discussions of religions, Islam or otherwise, that one way or the other risk promoting conflict and exclusions are not permitted in public space. For example, wearing of Burkas in public by the Muslim women is prohibited though hijabs are allowed. More importantly, equality of women, a Soviet legacy remains in practice.

Another interesting aspect of Uzbekistan's relationship between religion – all religions – and secularism and co-existence is that the prayer congregations are less public and more discreet. In Uzbekistan, prayers can take place only in designated places, away from public view and for the Muslims, in registered mosques. Prayers in open spaces such as parks or in public places such as offices, streets etc. are prohibited.

In terms of Uzbekistan's education system, there are both secular schools as well as madrassas and, all schools including madrassas are mandated follow secular curriculum up to grade 10 and those who wish to specialize in Islamic studies need to enroll themselves at secondary level, after grade 10, at the designated Islamic Tertiary institutes where courses include both Islamic studies as well as secular subjects such as science and literature. The

graduates of the Islamic Institutes are free to choose any profession they wish to – secular or religious. However, should anyone wish to take the job of an Imam, he must have the degree from one of these government approved Tertiary Islamic Institute where in addition to Islamic studies, courses in science, literature and civics are taught which every aspiring Imam must study and pass with good grades.

Secularism/Islam: Take-home Lessons

These examples, practices and theoretical precepts of secularism and those of Islam or for that matter, any religion demonstrate that one does not challenge the other nor practice of one compromise the other. On the contrary, Islam and secularism are perfectly compatible and are in conformity with each other.

In other words, Romila Thapar’s idea of secularism, namely “the functioning of the universe and human society without involving divine intervention” and Islam’s two basic tenets of governance, namely, “*Lakum Di Nukum Walia Din*” (your religion is to you and mine to mine) and Hazrat Omar’s governing principle “*Insaaf*” are in sync and not in conflict with each other.

Indeed, the most ideal way to govern societies, Islamic or otherwise would be through the principles of justness (“*Insaaf*”) and religious tolerance (*Lakum Di Nukum Walia Din*), tenets that guarantee, as in secular democracies, fair and equal treatment of all citizens and protection as well as nurturing of religious values and rituals through promotion of inter-faith tolerance and mutual respect.

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