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Part Seven: Islam and Nationalism

Islam and nationalism as two opposite poles

Simple patriotic sentiments, so long as they do not contravene the higher conviction of man is permissible in Islam, like the affection one feels towards one's father, son and family. But as already shown, nationalism does not stop at simple sentiments. It is a socio-political creed and an actual way of life which aims at a full control of man's individual and social conduct. Islam, too, being a school having its own independent, spiritual, practical, political and social system and comprising a particular set of beliefs, it naturally comes into conflict with the school of nationalism.

Unlike other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism etc, Islam is not confined to religious rites and metaphysical convictions. Had Islam been only a religion of devotions, it might have agreed with nationalism. But Islam is a religion with asocial and philosophical worldview, and provides for economic and political principles. Nationalism, too, has its own social and political principles based however on different beliefs and criteria. Therefore, conflict between Islam and nationalism is inevitable. The Islamic ideology is not compatible with any other ideology on the question of sovereignty over the private and social life of Muslims. A Muslim cannot at the same time be a Muslim and a polytheist, or a Muslim and communist. In Islam, there is no room for one to be a loyal and genuine nationalist. It is a question of identity, and one negates the other.

Nationalism is incompatible with Islam, both schools having two opposite ideologies. These two assume two totally opposite poles in their spirit, essence, direction and goal.

As we shall explain later, the Quran has explicitly rejected the basis of nationalism, and states that language, colour and race are no criteria for unity and privilege. The only criteria are belief and virtue. A common ideology is the basis of the unity of the Islamic ummah, not race, country, language or even culture. The goal of nationalism is to create national units, whereas the goal of Islam is universal unity. To nationalism what matters the most is loyalty and attachment to the homeland, whereas to Islam, it is God and religion. Nationalism gives authenticity to geographical boundaries and racial distinctions,

whereas Islam negates them. Nationalism inclines to limitation and race, but Islam assumes a universal outlook.

Nationalism attaches value only to the historical traditions, culture, civilization, ideas and historical figures of its own nation, but Islam's vision goes beyond the frontier, race, tribe and nation. Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Ali are considered as belonging to all mankind. Islam wishes all nations to regard the Quran as their Book, and the Ka'aba as their Qibla, and true leaders of Islam as their leaders.

It is very hard for nationalism to accept this view. According to its limited vision, it considers the entry of Islam as a transgression or as something dangerous. It associates the nation to Cyrus and Darius, not to Muhammad and Ali. It intends to revive its ancient past which Islam calls paganism. Islam curses the Pharaoh, but Egyptian nationalism makes him a national hero to be worshipped.

The logical result of this attitude is to revive national creeds. It is not surprising that during the nationalistic regime of Pahlavi, the creeds of Zoroastrianism and Baha'ism which were regarded as Iranian faiths, were encouraged by the regime. In the time of Hitler's domination over Germany, Nazi thinkers belonged to one of the two following groups: one group considered Christ as a Palestinian Jewish descendant and thus rejected Christianity, and the other group turned to Christianity and wanted to prove that Christ was not Palestinian, but of the Nordic race.

Islam says that all the Muslims in the world are members of the same body and all Islamic nations, Arab, non-Arab, Turk, Afghan, Indian, black, white and yellow must belong to one ummah in their belief. But nationalism considers the religious solidarity of a country with other nations as a danger for national and tribal identity.

Thus, nationalism's vision about society and politics is quite opposite to that of Islam, and these two cannot go together. That's why the nationalists of other Islamic lands regard separation from Islam a condition for nationalism to succeed, even if they do not utter it. Their acts reveal their hatred towards those who seek Islam.

The Prophet's combat with Qureish nationalism

At the advent of Islam and the Islamic revolution, the only social and political organizations of the pre-Islamic Arabs were the tribe, race and language which were used as measures of superiority or inferiority. Blood and tribal bond was the basis of unity, a rough and raw form of modern nationalism and racism. Language, too, was regarded as a sign of superiority and for this reason, the Arabs considered non-Arabs as “Ajam", which means dumb.

The progress of the Islamic revolution did away with this idea and with tribal organization; with the tempestuous slogan of “There is no god but God", it made conviction and ideology prevail over all attachments to blood, territory and language.

The Prophet (S) who founded the classless and universal society of Islam, actually brought various nations together and removed their tribal hues. At a gathering of three Muslims from three countries, namely Salman from Pars, Soheib from White Romans and Bilal from Black Ethiopia, an Arab named Gheys-bin- Motateba entered and addressed the above as 'foreigners'. The Prophet (S) said in anger: “Your father is the same and your religion is the same, and the Arabism of which you seem to be proud belongs neither to your father, nor to your mother (meaning Adam and Eve are the parents of all of you)". Then he declared: “He who propagates the creed of tribal solidarity or fights for its sake or offers his life for it, is not of us."

Nationalist forces and tribal prejudices stood stubbornly against this revolutionary message of Islam, and served as a barrier against its expansion. Those factors made the Qureish and other nations of the time take a posture against the Prophet of Islam. They protested why the Quran did not descend upon a select man of Mecca and Tayef. As the Quran says:

“And they say: Why was not this Quran revealed to a man of importance in the two towns?" (*43:31*)

Arab tribes with their limited tribal vision wondered why the Prophet (S) did not belong to their tribes and whether he intended to establish the superiority of his own tribe. Abu-Jahl said openly: “We are the equals of the family of Abd-Manaf. In horsemanship we are their rival and in generosity their equal. How is it now that they claim prophethood and revelation? By God, we will not accept Muhammad as a Prophet."

The same racial and tribal prejudice made the Jews who had long been waiting for the advent of such a Prophet, to stand against Muhammad. Thus they refused to accept the truth and were worried why the Prophet (S) was a descendant of Ismail and not of the Israelites. So they united the pagans and polytheists against the believers in God.

Kindling the flame of national feeling was the wickedest weapon of the Medinan hypocrites against Islam. In one case, one of their leaders, by bringing up the question of the Battle of Beghath, managed to get the two great Muslim tribes of Owss and Khazraj into conflict, when the following verse was revealed:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ إِن تُطِيعُواْ فَرِيقًا مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ الْكِتَابَ يَرُدُّوكُم بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ كَافِرِينَ

(آل عمران:100)

"O you who believe: If you obey a party from among those who have been given the Book, they will turn you back as unbelievers after you believed." (*3: 100*)

Abdullah bin Abi, a leader of the Medinan hypocrites was a loyal nationalist, and constantly instigated the people of Medina, in favour of nationalism, saying:

"A few beggars have come to our country from other lands and have become bullies. They are like dogs

which are fattened to assault us.”

He told the Medinans:

“It is wrong of you to have made those foreigners partners in your wealth and country. If you stop helping them today, they will flee."

In answer to these futile words, the following verse was revealed:

هُمُ الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ لا تُنفِقُوا عَلَى مَنْ عِندَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ حَتَّى يَنفَضُّوا وَلِلَّهِ خَزَائِنُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالأَرْضِ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لا يَفْقَهُونَ (7)
يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الأَذَلَّ وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لا يَعْلَمُونَ

(المنافقون7,8)

"They it is who say: Do not spend upon those who are with the Apostle of God until they break up. And God's are the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites do not understand. They say: If we return to Medina, the mighty will surely drive out the meaner there from; and to God belongs the might and to His apostate and to the believers but the hypocrites do not know." (*63:7-8*)

Thus, one sees the dangerous dimensions of the opposition to Islam based on tribal and national sentiments. It becomes clear with what has been said so far, that next to paganism and polytheism, the prejudice of blood, land, ancestors and tribe is the greatest enemy of Islam. The Prophet (S) fought strongly against it until he removed these barriers in the way of the divine ideology of Islam. The hostility between national prejudice and Islam is not anew phenomenon. It began with the advent of Islam.

Tribe worship (tribalism) and tribalistic sentiments have always been a threat to Islam. The nationalist Arabs take pride in their being Arab, not in being Muslims. An Egyptian thinks of his Pharaoh. A Turk tries to show his connection with Chengiz and Halaku. An Iranian takes pride in Cyrus, Darius, Buzarjomehr, Mani and Mazdak, instead of pride in Muhammad and Ali. An Indian makes heroes of the mythical Hindu figures, and instead of going to the well of Zamzam, he seeks the River Ganges. In this way, the entity of Islam is endangered. That is why Islam has always been hostile to nationalism.

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