

The Concept of Ummah & Pluralist Bangladesh

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I remember that as a student of Political Science of Dhaka University we used to debate why Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, while delivering presidential address at the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947 made the historic statement:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the State ... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.

“We should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as a citizens of the State” [Quotes from the Quaid, Directorate General of Films & Publications, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, Revised Edition, 1992, pp 103-104]

This statement of Mohammad Ali Jinnah created debate among the Islamic scholars, theologians and religious political personalities of the then Pakistan who objected to this statement saying the statement is against the very spirit of the Pakistan movement to establish Islamic political order in the new country so that its citizens could fashion their lives in accordance with the ideals and tenets of Islam.

Many years later I have now realized how correct was Mohammad Ali Jinnah in trying to establish a plural political order in Pakistan. This realization came to me after I visited Quantum Meditation Resort at Badhichara Hills, Lama in Bandarban, Bangladesh for three days starting from 8 March 2007. Thanks for the invitation extended by Hasan Abdul Quiyum Salim and Nurul Azam Chowdhury. The Quantum Foundation has established a magnificent school there and in its pre-nursery class, I am amazed to see, eleven children of eleven ethnic nationalities (Marma, Bom, Tripura, Tonchongga, Chakma, Murong, Khumi, Chak, Khiam, Lushai and lastly Bangali) speaking eleven different languages and having different religions are attending the class taught by a lone female Bangali teacher.

These children when they grow up, I am sure, will not accept an imposed monolithic Bangali nationality and why should we do that for we fought against Pakistan for our independent cultural identity. In fact an attempt to impose monolithic nationality in Bangladesh immediately after liberation was opposed by the Chakma leader Manobendra Larma who rebelled and took up arms to protect its distinct

cultural and ethnic identity. The issue was settled when the country accepted plural identity of our nationhood.

In fact it is not new for the Muslims to accept plural political order or to constitute a nation comprising of different nationalities. If we look at the Covenant of Medina which Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) concluded with Christians and Jews of Medina we find that Muslims, Christians and Jews are described in the Covenant as one Ummah, one community or one nation. Prophet Muhammad found nothing wrong in using the word one Ummah for Muslims, Christians and Jews at the same time. From this it follows that Islam believes in the concept of plural nationhood and not monolithic nationhood. The Covenant of Medina establishes that Muslims and non-Muslims could remain faithful to their respective religions and still constitute a nation.

The Covenant of Medina states “the Believers, whether of the Quraysh of Yathrib (Medina), and all individuals of whatever origin who have *made a common cause with them, all these shall constitute a nation*”. Articles 25b and 25 of the Covenant stipulate that *territory is the basis of granting citizenship instead of tribal lineage*. All resident became one community, including polytheists and the Jews.

The Covenant of Medina establishes a number of important political principles that, put together, formed the political constitution of the first Islamic state.

The Covenant declared that the Ummah is a political society, open to all individuals committed to its principles and values, and ready to shoulder its burdens and responsibilities. “This is a Covenant among the believers and the Muslims of Quraysh of Yathrib (Medina), and those who followed, joined, and labored with them”.

The Covenant emphasized *cooperation* between Muslims and non-Muslims in *establishing justice and defending* Medina against foreign aggression. “The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses. Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this Covenant. They must seek mutual *advice and consultation*”.

The Covenant stipulated that the social and political activities in the new system must be subject to a set of universal values and standards that *treat all people equally*. Articles 15, 17, 19 and 45 of the Covenant stipulates equality as the basic principle of an Islamic state.

Sovereignty in the society would not rest with the rulers or any particular group, *but with the law founded on the basis of justice and goodness, maintaining the dignity of all*. The Covenant emphasized repeatedly the fundamentality of justice, goodness, and righteousness, and used various expressions to condemn injustice and tyranny. Articles 13, 15, 16, 36 and 47 of the Covenant reject all form of tyranny and injustice. Thus the political system Islam envisages is basically is democratic and plural.

The plural and democratic nature of Islamic political order also becomes clear if we look at the constitutional proposal of the premier Islamic movement of the world – the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1952 Muslim Brotherhood drafted an Islamic Constitution for Egypt consisting of 103 articles.

The draft constitution puts forth the notion of civil state based on citizenship and loyalty to the state. Muslim Brotherhood put forward the idea of one state embracing Muslims and non-Muslims under the umbrella of loyalty to the nation (article - 88).

The draft constitution reiterates that *people* are born free, equal in dignity, rights and liberties without any discrimination based on origin, language, religion or color (article - 77). The word used in this article is *people*, an inclusive neutral word in the Islamic heritage, which expels any kind of discrimination based on sex or religion.

Each *individual* has the right to live freely, enjoying equality, security and safety (article - 78). The draft did not determine religion when recording rights. It used the word *individual*.

The Islamic Constitution drafted by Muslim Brotherhood disregarded one's religion being the prerequisite of becoming head of the state. Article – 4 stipulates that only an Egyptian can be member of the parliament and parliamentary membership is not restricted to any particular religion or cult and article – 25 states that head of the state can be any persons who meets all the conditions required for the Member Parliament and all these disregard origin, language and religion which is compatible with the aforementioned article - 77 of the constitution.

The draft stipulates that all people strive for their rights and for stopping tyranny of rulers (article 91) [The Legal Concept of an Islamic State According to the MB, Ikhwanweb – Cairo, Egypt, Monday, May 08, 2006].

It thus becomes manifest that the political system envisaged by Islamists of our time, like the model of the Prophet, is democratic and plural.

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