
Not Compromising Religious Traditions: An Asset To Inclusiveness

Shariah Affairs Editorial

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Keywords

Rise of Islamophobia - Islamophobia becoming the mainstream - guilty by association - conservative orthodox Muslims - equated with extremism - need to appear 'moderate' and 'liberal' - compromise on own's religious traditions - assimilation model - inclusiveness - staying firm on own's religious traditions - asset to inclusiveness - integration model - inclusiveness based upon shared political & socio-economic values - proudly displaying religious differences.

Abstract

Over the last decade or so, xenophobia and Islamophobia has been on a steady rise in the Western countries. UK is no exception. The 2016 London Mayoral election has marked a significant phase: the concept of guilty by association; worse many Muslims see their adherence to orthodox conservative Muslim values or to rephrase it - being a practising conservative Muslim can be seen wrongly, as a sufficient reason to be equated with the extremists.

Islamophobia entering the phase of the mainstream does not help and in fact many Muslims, despite harbouring well known pro liberal views, are coming increasingly under pressure to make themselves appear moderate and liberal enough in order to qualify to be seen as an 'inclusive' candidate. This meant according to some, the need to compromise one's religious values by being morally obliged to take part in rituals of other faiths - a type of assimilation model, with no guarantee that it would take away the extremist label.

This piece would argue that feeling the need to compromise own's dearly held religious traditions and values is a sign of weakness and insecurity. In fact, staying firm on own's religious tradition is an asset to the society that can add value to the inclusiveness and can even command respect. After all, it is the shared policies and socio-economic issues that becomes the common ground for community cohesion and inclusiveness which means at the same time being able to proudly display rich diversity of religions and cultures, all of which has been part of the integration model as opposed to the assimilation model adopted by mainly Franco-Deutsch Europe.

Introduction - background context and British Muslims

The recent election of the London Mayor 2016 was not an ordinary one. It was history in making. Following elections, the new Mayor, Sadiq Khan, announced a range of policies in the sectors of housing, policing, transport and to make London a greener city. A positive start. Weeks running up to the elections has proven to be hectic and ridden with controversy; controversy that bore all the hallmarks of racism and Islamophobia, led by the Conservative candidate, Zac Goldsmith. [1] A campaign, no doubt has marginalised many young to be Muslims, not of deprived backgrounds but of educated middle class with socio-liberal values interwoven with dearly held traditional Muslim values. If anything is achieved, it is in fact, many potential future British politicians losing faith and withdrawing from the political system altogether. Worse, as a result of the controversial racist campaign, many would be leaders feel alienated and some are on the verge of extremism. [2]

To exacerbate the matters, many of the UK media outlets did not shy away from showing support for such controversial campaign using whatever legitimate cover available from greener city to pro-business policies. British Muslims, mainly second and third generation of immigrants never looked elsewhere, be it their original ancestral home in countries where their fathers or grandfathers emigrated from or any other prosperous countries. Britain was identified as the only home and always referred to as the country of birth or as the home country even when paying an odd exploratory trip to the countries of their ancestors. If there were occasional humorous remarks about the way mother Britain treated Muslims, it was to be thrown out with a laughter with a frank rebuttal. However, over the period of last few years where Islamophobia went through its initial 'testing stage' and regrettably became more of an acceptable feature, questions begun to be asked and never been more so than at the 2016 London election time where Islamophobia led campaign were supported from the very top in Parliament: The Prime Minister David Cameron. [3] Such conducts took place or justified under the pretext of 'legitimate questions need to be asked'.

All hope is not lost; if anything, xenophobia and 'divide and rule' politics [4] was clearly rejected by the Londoners. They made a clear unequivocal statement through the ballot: It was a vote against bigotry, racism, Islamophobia and dog whistle politics. The vote was not just necessarily for Sadiq Khan, the son of a Pakistani Muslim bus driver who later went on to become a human rights lawyer and made use of all the opportunities London has to offer. It was a vote for, as Sadiq Khan puts it, 'hope over fear, unity over division.' [5] It was a vote for all inclusive Londoners. The remarkable outcome came as a comfort for thousands of practising Muslims Londoners who felt marginalised and pushed to the edge; who felt that taking part in active London life meant not just being smeared but being placed on a media trial of 'guilt by association' for happening to share the same faith claimed by the terrorists.

Staying firm on own's religious traditions: an asset to inclusiveness

Being a conservative practising orthodox Muslim with otherwise socio-economic liberal values need not be equated with the extremists. Modern Britain is a multi-faceted identity of being British, belonging to a faith or no faith, being able to proudly display one's own heritage and cultural values without any fear and consequences. Britain is not a country with xenophobic values where one's rich heritage and traditional values are brushed aside under the fallacy of monochromic British values. The British Muslims or Haredi Jews or otherwise should not be forced to give up their dearly held revered religious values in order to be seen as more 'acceptable' to the so-called mainstream media dominated audience. Never should the prospective talented politician full of energy face the stark choice between – living on the sidelines because of adherence to traditional religious values – and giving up their deeply held fine religious principles in order to be seen as a politician for everyone. Standing up for all Londoners need not be breaking religious traditions or diluting one's faith in order to take part in faith rituals of different constituents in order to win votes (or to be seen as liberal). To feel the need to compromise own's dearly held religious traditions and values is a sign of weakness and insecurity; a sign of lack of confidence. Worse, it would be a grave concern for a standing politician seen to be giving up dearly held principles in order to be seen as inclusive, as it would mean the individual does not stand on a set of firm beliefs, policies and principles. Being a candidate for all voters or all Londoners can be better demonstrated by visiting all people of all backgrounds, listening attentively and address key policy issues from housing and policing to education and health while at the same time being able to proudly show firmness on own religious traditions. It is better to have a Muslim mayor – who is disciplined in terms of having a principled

stance on religious views who sincerely fights on key policy issues – to represent the Christians, just as an orthodox Jewish candidate with uncompromising views on his or her faith, is in a perfect position to better represent Muslims on the basis of key policies and areas of concerns shared by both. The orthodox Jewish or Hindu candidates or candidates of no faith should be able to fight on policy issues without feeling the need to compromise on own's faith or belief by having to attend faith rituals of different religious communities (other than of course visiting the places of worship for community interaction or faith awareness). Indeed, it would be a grave concern if one attended or participated in others' faith rituals or acts of worship to win the votes (other than those, of course, who genuinely takes parts in acts of worship or faith rituals to genuinely explore faiths or spiritual discovery, which mainly applies to faith explorers and students of religion and divinity). By staying firm on own's religious tradition is to be seen as an asset to the society that can add value to the inclusiveness and after initial hostility (which the author(s) see it as a small tradeoff in the short term) would eventually lead to earning respect in the long term for being bold on religious principles and accommodating to society's needs at the same time. Being a candidate for all voters or all Londoners can be better demonstrated by visiting people of all backgrounds, listening, discussing their concerns and addressing key policy issues from housing and policing to education and health.

It is not the orthodox religious values that matters; it is the policies and shared concerns that matters: A Muslim and a British value

It is on this note that Sadiq Khan has won the votes on key policy issues, notably housing and making London a greener and safer city. The new mayor is to be commended for that. Never has housing issue been so important. It is shocking to see that in the 21st century, in a global city of a leading Western country with an established welfare system, housing is seen as a 'privilege' and a choice for selected citizens with thousands still living as homeless through no choice of own but due to the fault lines in the system and society. Just like essential humanitarian values and needs, such as reasonable quality of food and clothing, housing of reasonable standards of median value as opposed to the low substandard housing, should also be seen as equally important. Housing should be part of universal human rights in the context of modern Londoners. The popular model of housing growth being dependent upon wealthy foreign investors who are able to snap up the properties at without much scrutiny, at a disproportionate scale – up to 85% allocated for wealthy buyers and 15% for affordable housing, totally undermines housing needs and need to be reevaluated. A more reasonable position would be is to equally distribute the housing allocation on a 50:50 basis or to start off with, at 65:35 with the aim of eventually increasing it to 50%. Whether Sadiq Khan, the new London mayor, would have the political will to stand up to the mighty financiers amongst the property developers with vested interests in overseas investors, remains to be seen but he needs to be praised for vehemently campaigning on the housing issue. He should be judged on key policies and pledges, amongst them the housing; he should not be judged on his faith or judged disproportionately on how much extremism he has tackled. Housing should not be seen as a privilege but as a right for everyone, regardless of faith or backgrounds. It is an intrinsic Muslim value, a true British value. Sadiq Khan needs to be congratulated for being elected as the Mayor of all Londoners. He needs to be supported all along the way to make the housing dream for all Londoners come true. After all, he fought a well-respected yet hectic campaign with positive messages through extraordinary perseverance, in contrast to the opposite side's divisive campaign that received unfortunate blessings from the hierarchy of the respective party. Just as much as Sadiq Khan is mayor for all Londoners of all faiths and backgrounds whose faith issues and concerns would be listened to, it is equally hoped that the needs and concerns of Muslim Londoners would also be listened to and addressed just like others. Not less and not more.

There is still hope: Integration model of diverse traditions as opposed to assimilation model of monochromic values

On the positive note, the election result has dealt a blow to those who call for total withdrawal from mainstream British society and political system. It would also go some way to limit the damage caused in terms of driving certain segments towards further marginalisation and extremism as a result of Zac Goldsmith's Conservative-led Islamophobic campaign. This election would also send a strong positive signal to the wider region in the Western world where Islamophobia has become the norm rather than an exception: that multicultural values can enrich the society with newly carved out inclusive multi-faceted identity. Participation in mainstream society is perfectly possible while displaying the rich religious differences that can add colour to the diverse society, a society that is interwoven with common values and shared concerns: housing, policing, transport, economy, education, health and various religious needs of the society. The integration model adopted by UK and other Anglo-speaking regions, despite its flaws and complications, has proven to be more successful for community cohesion than the assimilation model adopted by mainly Franco Deutsch Europe. It is hoped that the election victory of 'hope over fear' would result in the Conservative governing party to reflect deeply, thoroughly investigate Islamophobia and draw a line underneath by initiating an action plan to eradicate Islamophobia and racism altogether, once and for all. For Zac Goldsmith, Prime Minister David Cameron and other ministers to apologise unreservedly to Londoners for supporting such offensive campaign would be a good starting point and a mark of a new beginning.

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