

MYANMAR AND THE LIMITS OF PAN-ISLAMISM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed countries on India's interests

Since Myanmar's latest bout of violence against the Rohingya began in 2012, there has been a slow uptick of outrage in the Muslim world. But it was only recently, once international observers described what was happening there as an ethnic cleansing, that Muslim concern became more vocal than protests in Europe or the U.S. In the past, Muslim-majority countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, at the receiving end of refugee flows from Myanmar numbering in the tens and even hundreds of thousands, have acted forcefully to prevent the Rohingya from entering their territories.

But last year everything changed, with Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan at the forefront of international demands to stop the flight of refugees from Myanmar and alleviate their suffering. Behind this change lay a number of causes, from the humanitarian, political and economic emergency created by the influx of refugees among Myanmar's neighbours, to growing Muslim protests around the world at the treatment of the Rohingya. The crisis also presented an opportunity for politicians to claim leadership in an otherwise fragmented Muslim world by demanding relief and justice for the Rohingya.

Turkey's President made strong statements about the crisis, putting it at the top of the agenda at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. His wife made a highly publicised trip to Bangladesh to be filmed and photographed in Rohingya camps, while donating and promising more Turkish aid. Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia also competed to deliver assistance in Rakhine state while engaging the Myanmar government in talks. The Bangladesh Prime Minister spoke about the plight of the refugees at the UN and demanded safe zones for the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Yet both Turkey's President and the Bangladesh Prime Minister use the same accusations of Islamic terrorism against their domestic opponents as are levelled against the Rohingya in Myanmar. And they do so for the same reason, in order to de-legitimise suspect minority groups and political opposition in their own countries. Like Myanmar, these states are all heirs to the 'War on Terror', deploying its language and practices to forge a new politics. What we are seeing is not disagreement between Muslim and non-Muslim states on the subject of the Rohingya, but instead fundamental agreement on a narrative of counter-terrorism that has been globalised beyond American control.

The Rohingya cause represents the return of states to leadership roles within the Muslim world, and it has made Islamic unity possible for the first time since the sectarian bloodletting of the Syrian war, to say nothing of the divide between Saudi-led and pro-Iranian movements across West Asia. All over the world, bar Afghanistan and Somalia, states are triumphing over their religious critics to champion Islamic causes long held by the latter. By suppressing such groups in the name of counter-terrorism, however, these states have also adopted their narrative of Muslim victimisation.

Non-state groups had been among the first to promote a narrative of Muslim victimisation, with jihadis as much as liberals drawing from a familiar humanitarian repertoire in which suffering demands an immediate and therefore violent response. But this storyline only dates back to the aftermath of the Cold War, beginning with Muslim mobilisations over the fate of the Bosnians during the breakup of Yugoslavia. International Muslim causes had earlier been political rather than humanitarian. They called for the establishment of certain kinds of states, rather than emergency measures to guarantee a people's survival.

In the ideologically defined conflicts of the Cold War, groups like the Palestinians emerged as political heroes rather than simply humanitarian victims. But nowadays they, too, are seen by their supporters as representing a humanitarian cause. This is due to their loss of an institutionalised political identity with the creation of the Palestinian Authority as an Israeli partner and the sequestration of Gaza. It is therefore their Israeli enemies who ironically are the only ones to grant Palestinians a political existence, by considering them actors motivated by ideas freely adopted rather than by purely biological needs.

Humanitarianism today is premised upon a distrust of politics, which is blamed for every crisis humanitarians seek to resolve. This means that any relief or intervention deemed to be political is condemned as hypocritical. Indeed, hypocrisy has become the gravest charge in the lexicon of liberals and militants alike. And it is the humanitarian or anti-political character of Muslim outrage that has allowed states such as Bangladesh and Turkey to appropriate it, just as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State had done before them for very different reasons.

It is not simply state violence that has muffled the voice of non-state actors in mobilising Muslims globally. Their outrage over Rohingya suffering has been viewed with suspicion among Muslims more widely. Pakistani newspapers have levelled accusations of hypocrisy against the religious and militant groups that specialised in charging others with it. And so Islamists outraged by the treatment of the Rohingya are reproached for their own violence against non-Muslim or sectarian minorities. Signalling the decline of such actors, this mistrustful response illustrates the internal shifts in Muslim opinion and protest.

The narrative of Muslim victimisation is arbitrary in its application. Palestinians, Bosnians and now the Rohingya might enjoy global attention as victims of this kind, but not Uighurs, Somalis, Yemenis or Chechens. The lack of Muslim solidarity in these cases cannot be attributed to politics understood as hypocrisy. Neither are they explained by the economic interests that are often thought to underlie such hypocrisy. They must instead be understood in terms of familiar storylines. Only a crisis that can be attributed to western imperialism, or Zionism understood as its surrogate, is a candidate for global Muslim solidarity.

Muslim outrage over the persecution of the Rohingya follows a familiar script. Like all such global mobilisations, whether prompted by the victimisation of fellow believers or Islam itself in alleged insults to its prophet, these demonstrations of solidarity are midwived in the West. This was the case with the first global mobilisation of Muslims in 1989, against Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. It is only books, cartoons, speeches or desecrations in Europe and America that give rise to Muslim protests globally, with similar publications or events in other places possessing merely local significance. Similarly, it is only those wars and humanitarian crises receiving either positive or negative attention in the West that end up as Muslim causes worldwide.

This trajectory illustrates the consequences of Western political and economic dominance. Since colonial times, Asians, Africans and Latin Americans have had to relate to each other through Europe and America. But such mediation also suggests the intimate way in which Islam's globalisation is linked to a West often seen as its enemy. As Myanmar but also Bosnia and Kosovo demonstrate, global forms of Muslim solidarity are not only prompted by calls for humanitarian relief in the West, but also favour the kind of military intervention whose deployment by western powers Muslims otherwise criticise.

Linked as they always have been to the West, global forms of Muslim protest are transient and easily dissipated. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya having been accomplished by Myanmar, and Muslim politicians with their constituencies around the world having had the chance to denounce it, the matter can be dropped until Rakhine's violence and refugees once again attract

the interest of a European or American public. The paradox of Muslim solidarity is that its global character remains dependent on the West conceptually as well as politically, even and especially when it is explicitly anti-western in form.

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