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Why I ain't no 'moderate' Muslim —Farish A Noor

By Farish A. Noor

Reading the recent RAND Corporation report on Civil Democratic Islam by Sheryl Bernard, I could not help feeling I had fallen into some time-warp and been transported back to the 19th century. Orientalist scholarship was then at its peak and Orientalist scholars and policymakers like Snouk Hurgronje were working closely with the colonial governments of western Europe, formulating strategies on how to divide and rule the Muslim world.

The report divides the global Muslim community according to a typology of Islamist types or categories, ranging from 'fundamentalists' and 'traditionalists' to 'modernists' and 'secularists'. It then proposes a number of crude strategies to get the 'fundamentalists' and 'traditionalists' to slog it out against one another, while keeping the 'modernists' at bay and the 'secularists' close at hand. Interestingly, the report recommends that moderate Muslims should be kept away from 'left-wingers' and anti-globalisation activists who are opposed to US economic, military and political interests. The overall aim, the report says, is to 'find strategic partners' in the Muslim world to help in the promotion of 'democratic Islam', which the author hopes will be the antidote to the problem of 'militant Islam' (or, since the term is increasingly used today, jihadism).

Those familiar with the language and discourse of the colonial powers in the 19th century will recognise the imperial semantics at work here. Then, as now, crude typologies such as the one being proposed here served the purpose of instrumental fiction that laid the foundations for concrete policies that were in turn implemented with vigour. This led to the colonial powers actively seeking comprador agents and clients among the subjugated Muslim masses who could be co-opted into their grand strategies, and then made to play the dubious role of cultural go-betweens and contact points between the colonial masters and their subjects. They gave a 'Muslim face' to the western colonial rule imposed by force of arms. (For a contemporary example of this sort of politics at work, one only has to look at Iraq and Afghanistan.)

The author recommends a 'mixed approach' in providing 'specific types of support to those (Muslim actors or groups) who can influence the outcome in desirable ways'. The 'desirable outcome' becomes clear when the report talks about the need to pacify anti-American elements and currents in the Muslim world that threaten US hegemony and its global projection of power.

There are also the usual platitudes about the thorny question of the underlying causes of Muslim anger. A close reading of the report reveals, however, that the question of the root causes of terror is hardly addressed at all. Rather, the report talks about how US policy should be aimed at promoting 'moderate Islamic' currents and ideas and how moderate Muslims should be helped in their struggle to promote democracy in their respective societies.

Here lies the crux of the problem: While there is nothing wrong per se with being a 'moderate Muslim', one could argue that moderate Islam cannot and will not be born in the laboratories of US think-tanks and policy institutes. Nor should the US or its allies be so cavalier in their issuance of edicts as to which state or government is 'moderate'. Thus far we have seen at least three cases where Muslim states have been bestowed the much-coveted honour of being 'moderate' Islamic states: Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. Yet in all three cases it is clear that the classification of 'moderate Muslim state' has more to do with the needs of US foreign policy than any real commitment to moderate Islam on Islamic terms.

How, pray tell, can Pakistan be seen to be a moderate Islamic state when it remains fundamentally

allied to US strategic goals and when harassment of Islamist opposition parties and actors remains routine? How can Malaysia be seen to be a moderate Muslim state when repressive laws such as the Internal Security Act — which allows for detention without trial — remain in place? Most baffling of all is the classification as a moderate Muslim state of Indonesia, where generals, including hardliners like Gen Hendropriyono — accused of the slaughter of hundreds in South Sumatra — are back in power.

A moderate Islam can emerge only from within the corpus of Islamic thought and Islamic norms and praxis. It has, in other words, to be a step in the natural evolution of Islamic society itself, on its own terms and at its own pace. But external powers bent on securing their tactical leverage — from oil and gas monopolies to military-strategic interests — are unwilling to allow the Muslim world to evolve on its own.

Taken in context, the RAND report reads as a clumsy, almost farcical document that attempts social engineering at its crudest. No Muslim academic, intellectual or activist worth his or her salt would want to be stained by the Midas touch of such a report, or the contaminating feelers of Washington's neo-con coterie. For most Muslims being a 'moderate Muslim' means, first and foremost, being committed to the values of democracy and human rights the world over, and opposed to the unilateral militarism and hegemony of the USA. Genuine moderate Muslims are the last people Sheryl Bernard and the USA can turn to for support and patronage. And that's why I ain't no 'moderate Muslim' by her standards. Thank God for that!

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