NOT JUST ABOUT SALVATION OR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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It has been suggested that of all the ideologies that sprang up during the 20th century (Communism, National Socialism and Islamic Fundamentalism), none are more toxic than Islamism. Islamism or Radical Islam or otherwise also known as Islamic Fundamentalism, driven by Islamists, is an ideology designed to use religion as a means of acquiring state power and forcibly converting those in its path to accept Islam as their religion. Islamism is different from the ideologies of Communism and National Socialism in that in the later two, those intoxicated by the ideology are the elite and the leaders. The masses figure out pretty quickly that there is not much in it for them after a while. Under Islamism, or Radical Islam, those forced into an intoxicated state by the ideology are the masses—the followers. The leaders simply wish to use religion as a tool to acquire power, and having accomplished that, they wish to rule their conquest by placing it under one law—Sharia or Islamic Law. It is impossible to find the prevalence of democratic rights in those Moslem countries that are not declared secular societies.

Much has been written and said about the weekly protests in Ethiopia by Muslim citizens. For its part, the government has arrested those that are allegedly the ring leaders of this ‘movement’ by claiming that laws have been broken, and in a country where everyone is free to choose his or her version of any religion, the demands being voiced are simply an enter to something else. For their part, the leaders of the ‘movement’ and their Diaspora supporters claim that the cause of the unrest is the interference of the government in the religious affairs of Muslims throughout the country. And as a result, the government has violated the Constitution, and unless it relents, the protests will continue as there is no force that can stop them. They cite the Arab Spring movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other places as an example of what can be accomplished when a determined public rises up against its oppressors and mobilizes its energies to control the outcome of events, and by definition, the future.

Let me acknowledge first, that Islam and its followers in Ethiopia have coexisted with Christians and Jews for centuries though there have been tensions between the religions from time to time. The one major exception of great consequence was the Muslim offensive and subsequent conquest of most of southern and western Ethiopia in the 15th and 16th century, notably during the merciless offensives of Gragne Mohammed (Mohammed the Left Hand). Secondly, one needs to be very careful not to confuse Islam and its followers with
Islamists. The followers of Islam are peace-loving people just like the followers of Christianity. Islamists, on the other hand, want to use religion as a tool of government—as a means of subjugating the conquered and forcing their will on the vanquished—all in the name of religion. They wish to dry out the roots of all other forms of religion including any form of spiritual life. Their aim is to conquer the world; abolish politics as such and run the world by men trained in Islamic law; and abolish national states. They wish to annihilate non-believers and non-followers. They are, in short, genocidal. One need not look too far in the distant to see what sort of rule has emerged whenever and where ever Islamists have taken over state or governing power. Thirdly, to use the Arab Spring movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya as an example of movements for democracy is, at best, a misreading of events, and hence, a wrong interpretation of history. The Arab Spring has been less about democracy and freedom than about corruption, abuse and despotism. The people of Tunisia did not revolt in the name of democracy. They revolted against a despotic regime that was squandering the wealth of the nation; they revolted against an uncaring regime that was bent on amassing family wealth rather than improving the lives of a relatively highly educated citizenry. The youth in Cairo, Egypt did not revolt in the name of democracy. Instead, they revolted against the despotic regime and the abusive treatment it meted out to its citizens. They revolted against a regime they perceived relegated the interests of their country to that of Western interests; they revolted against a regime that failed to look South to its African brethren rather than just east to the center of the Middle-East in search of cash. The people of Libya, egged on by outsiders, revolted against a despotic regime that had lost its ways and had awfully squandered the wealth of the nation. They revolted against a regime that failed to find a pathway for the employment of the youth. As a result, these are hardly examples that should be cited to equate the situation of the Muslim concerns in Ethiopia.

I grew up in the center of a vast ‘awraja’ in Ethiopia whose inhabitants were about 90% followers of Islam. Many of the small towns in this part of the country had at best, one mosque and a church or two. Unlike the assertion by some, including the politically motivated functionaries of the government, the number of mosques or even churches was a function of finances rather than active prohibition by the state. True, the growth of Christianity was encouraged either directly through the provision of finances (endowments and gifts by the royal family) or indirectly through the encouragement of missionary settlements where such existed. What was very different then was the fact that there was no practical separation between religion and state even though there was an explicit declaration that ‘religion is personal, country is for all’. In practice, however, the king not only had to have a bona fide bloodline, but must also be a Coptic Orthodox. The Ethiopia of today is much different than the one in which I grew up. The late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, had disavowed religion publicly, and current Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn is reportedly a protestant!

Any one visiting Ethiopia today will witness the multitude of mosques all over the land. There are mosques in the cities, mosques in the countryside, mosques near deserted highways and hamlets, and mosques next to churches and schools. In 2000, the noises blaring out of loud speakers in the cities of Addis Ababa, Nazret (Adama), Dire Dawa, Mekele and Harrar was deafening, and if Ethiopia had the equivalent of an EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), it would have banned such practices. Today, the public loud speakers have been dialed down because of the noise pollution, but the number of mosques has multiplied even more. If this is not an illustration of the progress that has been made by our Muslim brothers and sisters, it could be cited as an example of the level and
degree of tolerance exhibited by non-Muslims as well as by the government. As a matter of fact, one of the wisest concepts enshrined in the new Ethiopian Constitution is the separation of religion and state. It is forbidden by the Constitution to mix religion and political activity. While this by itself does not equate to religious freedom, it is an expression of both the intent and the willingness of the signatories to acknowledge the sensitive nature of the issue in Ethiopian society.

So, why are Muslims in Addis Ababa protesting every Friday after prayers, and why has the government allegedly locked up some of the ‘leaders’ of the Islamic movement in Ethiopia?

Ethiopia, a land-locked country by choice, has a large population of Christians and Muslims. It is a country immediately surrounded by Muslim countries: Somalia, Sudan (with the exception of South Sudan), Djibouti, and Somaliland. There is a sizeable Muslim population in Eritrea, Kenya, and Uganda as well. Ethiopia’s traditional antagonists have been Egypt—a stonethrow away, and Saudi Arabia--across the Red Sea, and Yemen. Although Yemen has had very close relationship with Ethiopia for centuries, the relationship between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia can be said to be more utilitarian than close. There are other countries of import in the region that have had designs on Ethiopia not as an adversary but as a country that could eventually be taken over by Islam. And indeed, for Islam and Islamists, Ethiopia could be viewed as the crown jewel of an Islamic conquest were it to become an Islamic country. A simple look at the regional map would support the point just made. As a result, there are a number of countries that wish to stir up trouble in Ethiopia. Many attempts have been made over hundreds of years to effectuate such conquest. The Ottoman Empire, the Egyptians and the Dervishes have all attempted to change the course of history in this part of the Horn of Africa. Egyptian attitude towards Ethiopia is driven by its unfounded fear of what might happen to the Nile should Ethiopia ever become an unfriendly source of the longest river and it’s lifeline. What has changed, however, is that, today, the conquest is not to be effectuated by an invading army, but if possible, by the misguided, the disgruntled and the religiously intoxicated citizenry itself.

That there is an unnecessary schism in the relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt is testimony to the colossal failure of Egyptian vision and policy with regard to, and jingoistic attitude towards Ethiopia. Egypt should have strived to form the best of relationships with Ethiopia, and should have cultivated a policy of mutual cooperation and development instead of belittling Ethiopia’s ambitions and aspirations. There could be no better ally to Egypt than Ethiopia. We drink the same water (our Um al Dunya), both have a long and proud tradition of early civilization and the people are closer to one another than their leaders admit.

As the self-appointed keeper of the faith, Saudi Arabia has interest in expanding Islam where ever conditions permit and its vast resources allow. The recent outburst and unprecedented rebuke of Ethiopia by the Deputy Minister of Defense should be seen in that light. By cracking down on the self-appointed ‘leaders’ of the Islamic movement, the government of Ethiopia is viewed has having frustrated the efforts of Saudi Arabia to achieve its goals surreptitiously. Earlier, and as a sign of their frustration, the religious police in Saudi Arabia had arrested 53 Ethiopians while they were praying in a private home. Yes, they have religious police in their country but wish to export religious fundamentalism to other lands!
After decades of civil war, the government and people of Ethiopia have a nation to re-build, and a huge as well as very diverse country to manage. Arguably, the government has allowed both for freedom of speech and freedom of religion although there is considerable debate if that had been achieved in reality. The government is not blameless. It believes in the principle of group rights as opposed to individual rights, and courted the Muslim community by making concessions to it while it was consolidating power. Many argue that, in the past, the government had manipulated events, and some see more effort at manipulating public opinion here as well. Misguided but well-meaning friends of the protestors have labeled the recent public release of a film about Islamists and terrorism as a public disinformation campaign—a form of propaganda. Yet, none have condemned the sinister propaganda of the Islamist leaders themselves and their Jihad declaring friends in suit and tie. Even beyond that, and incredibly, none have come to view the issue within the context of the international contest for religious superiority. It takes a bit of mental exercise to recognize that terrorism and Islamic radicalism have to be fought precisely with the same weapons and instruments it chooses to wage its wars: propaganda with propaganda, and when it chooses to engage, regrettably, with massive engagement.

Today, the tolerance of moderate dissent is an essential part of governing. But the religious and ideological dissent must not be allowed to go on forever and simmer. It is not a violation of religious freedom to prevent extremists from using religion as a cover for sedition and criminality. To combat radicalism in any religion or any form, governments have a duty to remove legitimate grievances and reduce or eliminate resentment where possible. But no one should expect this to succeed in an environment where the actors are more loyal to external influences, or where they hold entrenched positions that make compromise difficult. It seems to me that radical Islam has set out to make Ethiopians strangers to one another. Knowledge of each other and respect for one another was what made us one family, one country. Some of that has been lost now for a number of reasons. But tolerance for intolerant groups is very foolish. Indeed, it can be deadly!

There are extremists in all religions and in all ways of life. This is due partly to ignorance, selfishness, or passion. At the very least, inordinate passion and ignorance lead to violence, and the most disturbing of all violence is the one that seems to justify itself in the name of peace and/or religion. Radical Islam, just like radical Christianity, is less about salvation and religious freedom. It is about control, conquest and subjugation.

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