

Call to Action for a New and Just World Order

By Prof. Junaid S. Ahmad and Prof. Abdul Jabbar

Over the past few decades, “politics” became a dirty word globally to be left for the corrupt and deceitful. A healthy tradition of interventions by various social and political actors to remedy the shortcomings of modern concentrations of power – be it the state or private ones – seemed to be increasingly passe, and was replaced with the era of neoliberalism, the “end of history” mantra, and the general de-politicization of society. The end of the Cold War was interpreted by some, particularly those who had a vested interest in such an interpretation, as the obviation of meaningful political engagement. All that was needed, in their view, was a good dose of technocratic management and faith in the *bona fide* intentions of the rulers of the “free world.” People were brainwashed to think that if we just let the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization run the world, all will be well.

The 'global war on terror' (GWOT) has seriously altered this picture. The war on terror quickly became the war of terror. Politics, it seems abundantly clear, cannot merely be left in the hands of not-so-benign (it turns out) politicians and their handlers who have projected criminal displays of power rather than advanced peace, justice, and safety and security for any population, be it in global North or global South. The GWOT has significantly, if not completely, eroded any moral authority – if any was deserved in the first place – of Western democracies/plutocracies to preach the rhetoric of human rights, freedom, and democracy.

The post-9/11 world order

Invasions, occupations, drone warfare, and the invention of new gulags and torture chambers tragically characterize the post-September 11th world order. And ironically and most scandalously, the threat of terrorism has only escalated, with possibly the most vicious and massive terrorist force in Muslim history – in the form of the self-proclaimed Islamic state or ISIS – erected in the middle of and because of these global power plays.

It is also important to note that an ideological corollary to the GWOT has been the intensification of Islamophobia. The dehumanization of Muslims and the recycling of vulgar orientalist clichés about Islam are what have legitimated abhorrent practices such as indiscriminate bombing and waterboarding. But it is a mistake to perceive Islamophobia as merely a project designed to target, curtail, and eliminate the freedoms, rights, dignity, and even lives of Muslims. Islamophobia is fundamentally about targeting and undermining democracy everywhere. Through the rhetoric of combating terror and terrorists and protecting safety and security, the “masters of the universe” have instituted new regimes of repression – national security states that service centers of power even more obediently and control the voices of the voiceless even more effectively and ruthlessly.

It is precisely at this critical juncture, when the collapse of a certain model of democracy and development – as imagined and imaginary as that notion might have been in the first place – is rapidly occurring, that political engagement is both necessary and clearly re-emerging. While we do have very encouraging social movements, such as Black Lives Matter in the U.S., or the anti-

austerity political forces in Europe, or the public condemnation of some politicians' bigotry by masses, there is still the global hegemony of a politics which is reactionary and is attempting to mobilize disgruntled, disenfranchised, and increasingly impoverished populations in directions which offer more violence, hatred, and social injustice.

The xenophobic, anti-immigrant forces in the US and Europe, blind to the deaths of thousands of refugees fleeing the war-torn areas of the world, epitomize this phenomenon, as does a brutal group like ISIS which, it must be acknowledged, was able to gain as much ground as it has because of the despicable social and political conditions of present-day Iraq and Syria caused by the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

That illegal invasion, as President Obama stated categorically, decimated Iraq's infrastructure, reducing to rubble a smoothly functioning and prosperous country and unleashing chaos all over the region and thus providing fertile breeding ground for groups like ISIS to emerge. Violence and intolerance are to be condemned everywhere and by anyone, especially so in the United States with means to alleviate misery and destruction worldwide but acting like a police state, as evidenced by systematic murders of unarmed African Americans by police throughout its history, now more noticeable because of commonly available recording equipment.

This streak of violence and criminal intolerance in America is what made George Bernard Shaw say about this *potentially* great nation: "America is the only country in the world that has gone directly from barbarism to decadence without once passing through civilization." Luckily, there have been enough Americans throughout its history who have championed the cause of the oppressed and continue to do so at great personal risk -- enough to prove George Bernard Shaw wrong in his sweeping generalization.

New politics of social transformation

All public intellectuals have the mandate to play an active role in contributing to a new politics of social change and transformation. Those, like the authors of this article, with life experiences in both Pakistan and the U.S., and who have witnessed both the politics of hope and of despair ebb and flow in both countries, feel more intensely that we should and can lead the way to a bi-national grass-roots struggle to bring about the desired changes. We stand witness to the cascading crises in virtually every aspect of our lives, from the economic, political, cultural, ecological, and spiritual.

As individuals grounded in Islamicate contexts, we are alarmed by reactionary, fundamentalist, and exclusivist tendencies having mushroomed in the Muslim world. But we do not divorce it from global realpolitik, and the miserable social conditions callously imposed by the powerful in these societies. We see them as decaying but tenacious vestiges of the old order. Even leaders of many formerly colonized but now independent countries, sadly, have joined the imperialists by carrying on the colonialist agenda. They carry on what may be called an insidious form of indirect colonialism. They serve the interests of their former colonial masters or the new imperialists to stay in power, bringing nothing but misery to their own people.

Throughout history, the best of Islamic principles and practices have served the causes of social justice and egalitarianism by curtailing the excesses of tyrannical rulers and inculcating the

sanctity of human rights. It must be emphasized that not every political Islamist group is ISIS or the Taliban. There are shades and vastly different flavors that we are dealing with here. Sadly the simplistic and reductionist popular as well as academic discourse on the subject prevents meaningful dialogue to address issues of both politics and theology, and interfaith relations. Unfortunately, to a significant extent, think tanks and policy makers are implicated in this distorting reductionism.

What catalyzed this brief broadside from us were the consistently courageous, principled, and even prophetic positions being espoused by Pope Francis. From global socio-economic inequality to the issue of climate change, from Palestine to Greece, from indigenous rights to gay rights, the Pope has not wavered from taking firm stances on the side of justice for the weak and suffering and for the Earth that God has entrusted us to look after. He has done what politicians have consistently failed to do over the centuries: apologizing to the indigenous people for the brutality of European “crusaders” in the name of Christianity.

We believe that such a vocal voice emanating from the Church is an important development, and contributes immensely to the new politics necessary to address our myriad crises. For one, it revives the very spirited and liberatory message of Christianity that saw its manifestation earlier in the 20th century in the civil rights movement in the U.S., in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and in liberation theology in Latin America and the Philippines. It is the exact opposite of Christian white supremacists and the far right domestic terrorists who, according to *Right Wing Resurgence* by Daryl Johnson, have killed twice as many Americans as Muslim extremists in the U.S. since 9-11. In today's GWOT context, progressive Christianity is expressing solidarity across the globe, across faiths, and across cultures. In particular, it is challenging and combating rising Islamophobia, and concretely working to halt cruelties and injustices being inflicted on many parts of the Muslim world. What this points to is a faith-based politics of social justice that must be accommodated in the new emancipatory struggles in the world.

Enlightened humanism

One only need re-visit and gain strength from the glorious eras of social justice and egalitarianism virtually in every religion of the world. There is reason to hope that where politicians have failed miserably, the right kind of faith-based leadership may yet succeed. Many organizations, such as U.S.-Pakistan Interreligious Consortium (of Intersections International under the leadership of Rev. Robert Chase), Tikken (under the leadership of Rabbi Michael Lerner), Zaituna College in Berkeley, California (the first Muslim liberal arts college in the United States), Jewish Voice for Peace, United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance, and many more enlightened religious groups are making their presence and message felt. They are all united against bigotry and acting for a just order. Prejudiced views that wrongly consider all forms of Muslim political thought and practice as being inherently reactionary need to be debunked.

There is a long tradition of liberative and progressive currents in Muslim history. Enlightened humanism of Islam's Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn-al-Arabi, Rumi, Rabia of Basra, and in modern times that of Jamaluddin Afghani, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and numerous others is reason for optimism. Their teachings are being incorporated and

integrated into novel, dynamic politics of social justice. Rare American political leaders, such as the socialist democrat presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders and the independent presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein, espouse the values that we would like to see legislated to transform oligarchy of corporatocracy (based on greed and exploitation) into civilized societies (based on justice for all). Inspired by the best of Islamic past practices, Tunisia's recently promulgated constitution, for example, guarantees free health care to all in need, equal rights for both men and women, and allocation of government funds to combat climate change. All three of these goals have yet to be met in the United States, the world's most powerful country. Many other countries can also learn from Tunisia's example.

Respect for pluralistic differences

What this new form of political engagement is able to do more effectively is to displace an older form of depoliticized multiculturalism with one which preserves the commitment to the mutual respect and pluralistic celebration of differences (along ethnic/national/racial/socio-religious-cultural lines) but combines it with a politics of social justice and liberation of all oppressed and marginalized groups. This, if you will, is the key insight as we move forward into the 21st century and beyond: Nurturing and upholding pluralistic, multicultural societies that foster interfaith harmony and understanding must recognize the centrality of the question of power and how that is distributed within and among societies/nations. This recognition will then lead to corrective action to remove gross imbalances of power.

Students and grass-root movements have always played a pivotal role in steering their societies in the right direction. Once again, they are poised to take the lead with help from those intellectuals who believe that narrow-minded and self-serving politicians and the status quo are at war with human beings' best potential. In this context, the recent example of Finland is encouraging. Fifteen thousand people gathered to condemn one of their political leaders who called multiculturalism "a nightmare." Olli Immonen, the Finnish Member of Parliament is known for his anti-immigrant stance. The participants in rallies and protests have demanded Immonen's resignation. Such actions by masses need to be replicated all across the globe to end the tyranny of the so-called "democratic" capitalism that has been strangling the potential for a change for the better.

There are many ways in which each of us can be an agent of the change that we want to see. All of us can and should participate in this broad-based struggle. Democracy, surely, is not a spectator sport. This is a call to people of all faiths as well people who espouse no faith other than humanism. It is a common struggle for all humanity, and the contributions of avowed atheists like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russell, and numerous others deserve recognition. They are completely compatible with the highest principles of all religions and steeped in spiritualism. The steps that we can take may vary from person to person, depending on their expertise and resources.

Political activism

Political activism can be introduced through mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples and with help from campus communities to launch actions on focused topics, such as police brutality targeting African Americans (in desperate need of intervention by the Federal government), the

widening gap between the rich and poor and how to reverse it (through tax reform, for example); climate change and what masses can do about it (take public transportation as much as possible and ask our governments to embrace green technology, using solar panels for energy, following the lead of Germany), immigration reform (to stop abuse of refugees fleeing endemic conflicts), minority rights, and similar topics. Any action for the cause of this change that anyone takes is sacred and, according to the highest Islamic values, an act of worship.

There is a need to organize at every level – local, city-wide, state-wide, and national – with an overarching body, if possible, delineating steps to be taken and monitoring progress. Another option is simply to join numerous organizations that are already trying to create a just social and economic order. Among such organizations are Avaaz, The American Civil Liberties Union, Move On, Nation of Change, Change.org, Center for National Interest, Just Foreign Policy, and many more. By being on their mailing list and signing their petitions, one can contribute to this struggle for change. Those among us who wish to contribute to this effort in more conventional manners can do so by writing to and calling their political representatives in Congress, writing to editors of newspapers, organizing neighborhood groups, and formulating any creative moves that they can think of. All options are open. The only option that is not open is inaction.

Mutual coexistence

Dialogues and understanding between civilizations, cultures, and religions are important, but they must never be used as a substitute for meaningful social and political engagement that get to the heart of the grievances of the oppressed. Edward Said's words from "Reflections on Exile" that the world desperately needs to "elevate appreciative sympathy" and "diminish orthodox judgement" should not just remain a dream. They should be turned into reality through sustained political action to accept different cultures, according to Said's vision, as contrapuntal notes in music that create harmony. The choice is starkly simple: It is either mutual coexistence without coercion, or mutual annihilation. And the only way to achieve mutual coexistence despite our differences is through dialogue and unwavering political engagement, not with bombs and threats. In the stirring words of the independent presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein, "the power to create this new world is not in our hopes; it's not in our dreams – it's in our hands."

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