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The London Bombings: Fundamental Change in Fundamentalist Times

Norman Vasu*

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IN the investigations of the bombings that took place in London on 7 July 2005, it has been revealed that all four suspects who perpetrated the bombings were young British men and not Al Qaeda operatives from abroad. Following this revelation, the headlines of the British tabloids captured the zeitgeist. The *Daily Mail* ran the headline ‘Suicide bombers from Suburbia’ and asked how “these utterly British streets produced such twisted young men who hated this country so much”. The *Sun* ran a headline along a similar vein, with the front page declaring ‘The Brit Bombers’ and describing as “truly shocking” that the “backpack butchers” were young Britons.

In the wake of the attacks, Prime Minister Tony Blair told the British Parliament “security measures alone are not going to deal with this”. He suggested that extreme ideology found within segments of the Muslim community can only be defeated by the community itself. To achieve this, he appealed to the moderate voice of Islam to drown out extremist voices.

When faced with this threat, the usual responses have been proffered. Calls have been made for the British government not to neglect the need to better integrate British Muslims into mainstream British society in order to avert defections to the fanatical jihadi camp. The argument goes that many British Muslims have become alienated in, and disenchanted with, British society due to the Blair government’s participation as a key player in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, these embittered British Muslims have turned to the teachings of the more radical imams (Muslim preachers) spouting their doctrine. The touted solution to this scenario is one which argues for these largely foreign radical imams to be kept out of Britain and more local moderate imams to be cultivated from within the British Muslim community.

While keeping radical imams out of Britain may go some way to protecting impressionable individuals from the fundamentalist logic, the question surrounding why the diatribe espoused by the jihadis has an appeal remains unanswered. It is not over-reaching to suggest that these individuals are not automatons that will follow the teachings of anybody willy-nilly. If the four bombers are our guide, these individuals are well-educated and well-informed with what they see as a justifiable gripe against both the British state and what they understand as the ‘West’. Consequently, it could be argued that the terrorism committed by these men suggests a failure of mainstream institutions in Britain to represent their grievances. The issue is not that they have been led astray but that they may have been led astray because their views have few legitimate mainstream outlets of expression. These youths may not have enough willing voices within the leaders of their community to act as an

outlet for their displeasure and, as such, turn to the next available alternative source found in the jihadi camp.

British Muslims and the Attitudinal Gap

British Muslims number roughly 1.6 million and constitute about 2.9 percent of the total population. The community is however far from monolithic. Besides the differences in economic background within the community, there is a clear attitudinal gap between different generations. In trying to understand the attitudinal gap, there may be utility in the work of Marcus Lee Hansen and what has become known as the “Hansen third generation return” hypothesis.

Hansen was concerned with the attitudes of immigrants to the culture of their new country. More specifically, he was concerned with the question as to whether there is a reversal of the assimilative process as one proceeds from one generation of immigrants to another. Through his research, Hansen found distinct differences between each generation. First-generation immigrants tended to maintain the values of their cultural traditions and did not intermingle with the larger society to a significant degree. The second generation assimilated to a greater extent and correspondingly did not give much attention to the cultural values of their country of origin. However, according to Hansen, there is a return to an appreciation of traditional values in the third generation.

The attitude of British Muslims seems by and large to be in keeping with Hansen’s hypothesis. Unlike the previous generation of Muslims who had a predilection to keep their heads down, coupled with an attempt to assimilate into British society, the current generation are unafraid to communicate their dissenting views while also being awakened to their ethnic/cultural roots. As expressed in the British newspaper the *Guardian*, the new generation of British Muslims do not possess the “don’t-rock-the-boat attitude” of their forefathers. They feel moderate leaders of their community have failed to represent their indignation and anger over the British government’s participation in the war on terror owing to the don’t-rock-the-boat mentality of old. As such, with few leaders acting as sounding boards for their concerns, some feel disconnected from mainstream society and have turned to the teachings and politics of fundamentalist Islam as their agitation “can be contained no more”.

Responsibilities of British Muslims and British Non-Muslims

Faced with a need to absorb dissenting British Muslim views into the mainstream, change will have to come from both Muslims and non-Muslims in British society.

The non-Muslim community must understand that critical views expressed by the Muslim community are not indicative of their desire to either overturn British society or a rejection of British values. If Hansen is correct with his third generation return hypothesis, the reawakening of British Muslims to their roots as well as their willingness to express dissent should be viewed as a natural process to be absorbed into the British national fabric. Thus, paradoxically, in order to remove the powder from the keg, the British government may have to encourage greater dissent from the Muslim community. The government will have to offer these alienated voices the opportunity for the grievances to be heard. It has to engage with these discussions rather than sweep them under the carpet. It is only by doing so that unhappy alienated elements of the community can be persuaded back into the mainstream where differences are resolved via discussion rather than bombs.

Statements such as the one made by Deputy Assistant Commissioner Brian Paddick points towards the mindset that has to be present when engaging with the Muslim community. After the bombs, he maintained: “As far as I'm concerned Islamic and terrorist are two words that do not go together.” In addition, one could even go further and maintain that “dissenting Muslim views” and “anti-British” are two concepts that have no truck with each other.

What about the British Muslims? The Muslim community has been correct in strongly condemning the actions of the suicide bombers. The *fatwa* (religious decree) issued by more than 500 British Muslim leaders and scholars expressed condolences to the victims of the atrocity and condemned the use of violence and the destruction of innocent lives while reiterating that suicide bombings are “vehemently prohibited”. This *fatwa* is praiseworthy. Furthermore, marches to be organised by the Muslim Council of Britain in order to demonstrate revulsion at the bombings are timely. These actions go far in assuring non-Muslims that these extremists do not represent the views of the community.

Besides these actions, the Muslim community needs to go through some form of introspection. Muslim leaders must realise they need not walk on eggshells fearful of offending. They should be confident enough of their firm position in British society to express dissenting views freely. They must also realise their community is undergoing a transformation and their role as leaders will have to transform along with it. By not rocking the boat and by failing to fully represent and address all views within their community, they may be doing more of a disservice than a service to the British Muslim cause.

* Norman Vasu is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University; he studied in the UK for 10 years and has a PhD in International Politics from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.