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Obama's Mosque Visit: A Big Deal?

By Juhi Ahuja

Synopsis

US President Barack Obama visited a mosque in the US for the first time on 3 February 2016. Noted by some as a gesture of religious inclusivism and tolerance, it however raises the question of the actual value of the visit.

Commentary

DOMESTIC POLITICS in the United States are at an exciting juncture, with the presidential race going on with new debates surrounding foreign policy in the Middle East, the fight against Islamic State, and the resultant refugee crisis. In the midst of all the action, Obama visited a US mosque in an official capacity – the first US president to do so. While his effort is generally well received, it raises questions regarding the timing of the visit, its implications for Muslim Americans, and whether or not it is of any significant value.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that a visit to a mosque by a head of state is more likely to gain attention than a visit to a church or temple. Credit is due to the Obama administration for symbolically supporting Muslim Americans and calling out selective intolerance by the general American public. Nonetheless, the recent mosque visit is unlikely to result in any concrete impact in terms of reducing bigotry against Muslims or preventing further social distancing of the Muslim community - unless it is followed up with more high-level visits and policies.

About Time

It is a rather bold move for a US president who had been purported to be a Muslim himself - though subsequently denied - to visit a mosque, as it is indicative of his

dedication to promoting a pluralistic society. However given that Obama is coming to the end of his tenure as president, it is a seemingly calculated strategy in the sense that he does not have a potential vote bank to please, or it could be that it is an attempt to highlight his commitment to religious issues before he steps down.

If this visit had taken place in the middle of his tenure, it could have resulted in a backlash from factions of the majority Christian population or the more conservative Republican Party. This is because it could be perceived or politicised as being an effort to appease Muslims, rather than taking a tougher stance on them, as some Republican presidential nominees have suggested should be done. Although sceptics have raised questions as to why this visit did not come earlier, it is also of significance that Obama was in fact the first US president to make it.

When George W. Bush was in power, his post-9/11 'War on Terror' overseas was accompanied by reassurances to Muslims at home that their safety and security was of paramount importance to the US government, and that radical Islamist ideologies should be separated from the mainstream, "moderate" Islam prevalent in the US.

Similarly in the speech Obama gave at the Islamic Society of Baltimore on 3 February, he emphasised that Islam is a peaceful religion, and that it is the responsibility of every American citizen to help resist extremism. Obama reiterated his inclusive stance by asserting that Muslims play an important role in American society and that there is no space for religious intolerance.

Implications for Muslim Americans

While having a significant symbolic value of signalling to Muslim Americans that their interests are being taken care of, it remains to be seen if this visit will reduce the number of attacks against Muslims and Islamic institutions, which have seen a spike in the past months. This is especially so as there have been reports that the mosque he visited has ties with foreign Islamist networks, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

The US has also been widely criticised for its lack of empathy for victims of the Syrian civil war, as it had taken in only around 1,600 Syrian refugees since 2011, as of September 2015. Hence this visit could be a signal of the Obama administration's increasing awareness of the severity of the situation, where Muslims in America are empathetic to their Syrian brethren and more young Muslim Americans are becoming radicalised due to sentiments of exclusion and alienation.

However the speech made by Obama during the mosque visit constantly attempted to relate Muslim Americans to other religious groups in the US, by quoting similarities between scripture, and the overall experience of what it means to be an American.

The Big Deal

Although it is likely that this mosque visit will pave the way for future visits by successive presidents, not only to mosques but to other religious establishments and places of worship, it is unlikely that those visits will receive similar levels of attention and evaluation. Islamist extremism is a dominant international political theme; any

actions or policies directed at Muslims in the US will be followed by Americans and Muslims around the world.

Unless Obama's visit is followed up with efforts to reduce religious attacks and promote inclusiveness towards Muslim Americans throughout the country, it is unlikely it will have a significant impact. Beyond being the first incumbent president to visit a US mosque, little may be remembered by Muslim and non-Muslim Americans. It is likely, however, that people from other religious minorities will begin asking for more rights and questioning their status in American society.

It is yet unclear if Obama's efforts will encourage sustained efforts to integrate Muslim Americans into the mainstream of American society. It will be worthwhile observing whether Obama's mosque visit and speech will create a false sense of national unity, while overlooking the actual grievances faced by Muslim Americans. The onus is on the next US president to continue to encourage equality and religious harmony, and push for the values of a pluralistic society to be upheld.

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