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Islamophobia: Fuelling the Cycle of Violence

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

Anti-Muslim rhetoric and discrimination can heighten religious identities, drive social seclusion and increase attitudes of intolerance amongst segments of Muslims who are vulnerable in society. This in turn legitimises the prejudicial beliefs underlying discriminatory practices. This polarising dynamic, in part, contributes to a cycle of violence in certain Western societies.

Commentary

YET ANOTHER horrific attack (this time in Brussels) grabs the news headlines. Since 9/11, such shocking instances of deadly attacks by Muslim minority citizens in Western countries, and growing religious intolerance expressed in parts of Muslim societies, feed into worldwide fears of terrorism and creeping religious fundamentalism. Fear drives the public sphere to effectively typecast Muslims based on globalised images of the “Islamic terrorist” or the “religious fundamentalist”, which results in discriminatory practices that target and affect Muslims disproportionately.

However, very few Muslims pose actual security risks as terrorists or religious fundamentalists, nor are discriminatory practices limited to concerns over security. Instead, Islamophobia also acts to typecast Muslims as the “uncompromising other” or the “complicit silent Muslim majority”, which are perceived as equally threatening to the majoritarian ethos, and should therefore be removed, controlled or subordinated. This polarising tension is further compounded in some polities that are unable to accommodate legitimate manifestations of religious identities in the public sphere, which heightens inequalities that are ultimately detrimental to social harmony.

Post-9/11 Islamophobia in the West

US President George Bush's "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" dictum, which was in part from a Biblical verse, was intended to spur nations into collective action against terrorism. However, it took on a divisive connotation when Western Muslims, like Muslims elsewhere, found themselves at the receiving end of discriminatory social and political actions. For instance, non-citizen US residents from Muslim-majority countries were required to undergo special registration, which included interviews, fingerprinting and photographing.

Today, Muslim travellers continue to be "randomly selected" for extra security checks at airports; Muslims get pulled off planes because their looks or language make fellow passengers "uncomfortable"; and with no just cause, mosques and religious groups are infiltrated by agents from law enforcement.

Post-9/11 discriminatory practices stemming from security concerns foster an environment where curtailing Muslims' liberties are deemed a rational, even permissible option. This has allowed Islamophobes to normalise their anti-Muslim sentiments by bringing into the mainstream what had been on the fringes.

In a manner reminiscent of orientalist discourse, religious text and Muslim practices are held up as evidence of Islam's primitive, backward-looking or violent bent with little consideration of the historical, contextual and cultural meanings, or the rich diversity of Islamic theological interpretations. Where there are already existing socio-economic inequalities between Muslims and the non-Muslim majority because of structural racism, for example in Europe, the polarising effects are more pronounced.

Concerns over erosion of national identity and Western norms take on an added importance with the "othering" and suspicion of the "complicit" Muslims, resulting in new limitations on the public manifestation of Muslim religious identity.

In Europe, there are bans on Muslim women's personal choice of religious dress, building minarets on mosques, and animal slaughtering practices. In America, although no Muslim group has advocated the implementation of Islamic law, 16 states have already introduced legislation to ban or restrict its implementation. Anti-Muslim hostility also limits the freedom of Western Muslims to build places of worship, even on private property.

Implications of Islamophobia on Young Muslims

In some states, an entire generation of post-9/11 Muslims has come of age in this toxic climate of fear, racism and intolerance. As a response, some completely disavow the religious identity that intractably locks them into a marginalised second class status.

However, given that identity markers such as ethnicity and class that are also associated with one's marginal status cannot be as easily discarded, a larger number instead turn to religion in search for a meaning that could help define a

sense of dignity and self-worth. This drives the primacy of one's religious identity over other identities. Indeed, rather than the waning of religiosity, we have seen an increased importance of religious adherence by young Muslims in the post-9/11 period.

Increased religiosity can bring comfort and strength in the rejectionist climate of Islamophobia, but it can also increase the tendency of the most vulnerable in society (with class, education and economic inequalities) to close ranks as a protective mechanism.

One outcome of closing ranks is social seclusion as means to avoid confronting overt societal hostility that could prompt further restrictions on liberties. Social seclusion that reduces inter-societal interactions can breed intolerance – a reactionary rejection of the Islamophobic rejectionists.

Aggrieved Muslims can reject fair criticism and be resistant to inclusive and pluralistic interpretations of religion, for fear of being further diminished. In its most extreme expression, this dynamic creates divisive conditions for disaffected individuals to become receptive to extremist reasoning; and we already see the effects of this in some Western contexts.

Reconsidering Standard Approaches to Managing Diversity

The rise of Islamophobia with the resultant discriminatory practices in some Western states highlights the tension between political secularism's promise of equality and freedom for all citizens, and the religious inequalities that flourish in the social life of the polity, which at times are reinforced by state action.

Plural societies are a reality of our inter-connected world. Given that Muslims now account for one-fourth of the world population and by 2050 will nearly equal the number of Christians (both religious groups together will constitute 61% of the world population), it is imperative that societies begin to re-consider standard approaches to management of religious diversity.

The first step in breaking the cycle of violence is to ameliorate religious inequality by recognising and accommodating the transformative nature of plural societies – and not to deny and resist it. Identities and norms, on both sides of the divide, can and will change with increased social interaction, understanding and acceptance.

With an emphasis on inter-faith dialogue and education, commonalities based on mutual conceptions of justice, equality, freedom and respect between different groups can be found, and perceived irreconcilable differences can be mitigated. Knee-jerk responses to violence that are Islamophobic-driven are not only unnecessary, self-defeating and ethically wrong; in the long run, they contribute to societal strife.

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