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From Legitimacy to Social Change: Understanding the Appeal of Salafism

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Synopsis

As a religious ideology, Salafism is gaining wide acceptance in the Muslim world while attracting increasing attention in the West today. Many Muslims embrace it as the authentic Islam. What are the features that make Salafism so appealing to many Muslims?

Commentary

THE USE of the term Salafism in the current discourse on Islam is largely ambiguous and often confusing. This ambiguity stems from the realisation that many Salafis themselves are not entirely clear as to what Salafism entails, assuming that it is simply to follow the Quran and the Sunnah (the Prophetic Traditions). This is a problematic definition since it implies that others do not.

Furthermore, due to the ambiguity of the term, Salafism in a broader sense, is claimed by all Muslims in that the universal Islamic ideal is to emulate the Prophet and the pioneering Muslim community. In this respect, the term Salafism connotes authenticity and legitimacy. Despite the amorphous nature of Salafism, there is growing interest among the Muslims today towards Salafism. Many are attracted to the ideals of Salafism. Why is this so? At the same time, there is a need to have a finer understanding of the term “Salafism” given that it has generally been used rather loosely to connote something controversial.

What is Salafism?

The term Salafism as used today refers to a religious inclination or tendency towards a set of ideas and identity. These ideas and identity are subscribed to by Muslims

who advocate strict adherence to their understanding of Islamic practices as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad, the final prophet of Islam, and subsequently practised by the early pious predecessors known as the *salaf al-salih*. Following the *salaf* is the reason for their self-designation as Salafis.

The ideas and tenets of Salafism are those that reflect moral, social and political interests and commitments of Salafis today and constitute their ideology of how the world and its system should work. This belief system is based on pure, undiluted teachings of the Quran, the Sunnah and practices of the early Muslim generations (the *salaf*).

Salafis advocate a return to Islamic sources by emulating and following the footsteps of early generation of Muslims. Many of them tend to disregard the ways of Muslims who came after the third generation of Islam as they see that Islam during this subsequent period has been tainted with innovations and many Islamic practices are seen as heretical. Some prefer to call them “neo-Salafis” to distinguish them from the *salaf al-salih* – the pioneering generations of Muslims.

Appeal of Salafism

Many Muslims especially the younger generation are attracted to Salafism due to its appealing ideas and tenets which could be summarised as follows:

Legitimacy and Authenticity:

Salafism’s basic proposition is that legitimacy, whether in the religious, social, or political realms, must be explicitly derived from the earliest Islamic precedents. As such, Salafis assert that Muslims must refer only to the original textual sources of the Quran, Sunnah of the Prophet and traditions of the authentic *salaf* on all issues. When a modern problem arises, it should be resolved through interpreting the original sources of Islam without being bound to the interpretive precedents of the earlier Muslim generation.

In their fervour to return to a “pure” interpretation of the religion, Salafis tend to reject ‘any kind of rationalist orientation in a wide variety of Islamic intellectual teachings’. This somewhat distinguishes the Salafis as those who generally disregard the Islamic intellectual heritage as an important reference in pursuing Islamic scholarship and guidance.

This includes a rejection of exercising “*ijtihad*” (Arabic: “effort”) which in Islamic law refers to the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Quran and Hadith (the Prophet’s Sayings), and *ijma*’ (scholarly consensus). By rejecting *ijtihad*, Salafis believe they can circumvent the human dimension (original thinking, personal judgment and analytical reasoning) which may dilute the divine messages with possible human errors, biases and miscalculations. Hence, the appeal is one of purity of divine guidance.

Providing Solutions:

Salafis claim that Salafism offers solutions to dilemmas faced by Muslims today by

providing a simplistic demarcation of the realm of belief and disbelief. They assert that by adhering strictly to the Quran and Sunnah, Muslims can lead a pure, Islamic way of life. Salafism offers Muslims simple answers and quick fixes to almost any issues at hand. For example, any issues pertaining to Islam that is not from the Sunnah is considered by them as haram or not permissible.

This dichotomous choice is simpler in nature and easier to apply in a globalised world where there are many grey areas affecting Muslims in matters of their faith and day-to-day living. Hence, Salafism offers an anchor for Muslims looking for a definite collective identity in a world that seems to relentlessly erode their identity. It offers signposts and guidelines for Muslims searching to practise Islam in a world seemingly at odds with Islamic principles.

Activism:

Salafism positions itself in the political, social and economic spheres as the main ideology - that a believer is not just bound to individual salvation but is also an active agent for social change. In other words, Salafism as an ideology does not confine itself to how an individual should practise Islam, but also to shape how the Islamic society should live according to the Salafis' reading of religious texts.

This characteristic in particular attracts the idealistic Muslim youths, keen on social reform. For some Salafi movements, they are involved in social welfare activities aimed at changing the society using the ground-up approach. Other Salafis are active in political participation. They see the importance of applying the Salafi tenets to the political arena, which they believe will impact social justice and the right of God alone to legislate.

Again, in an environment that is seen to be increasingly hostile to Muslims and their practices, Salafism offers an active solution whereby their followers are able to do something to change their situations. Thus the appeal is one of productive activity to bring about change on various levels.

Salafism vis-à-vis the Modern World

Today, Muslims increasingly live as minority communities in many parts of the world and under secular or non-Islamic systems. They travel from one place to another and integrate with other communities. Though its appeal is multi-factorial, Salafism's distinct and exclusive teachings pose a great challenge to the prospect of Muslim and non-Muslim relationship and interaction.

It can be also argued that accepting Salafism could have profound implications in the context of today's socio-political reality. This is especially so where the world continues to witness a unidirectional move of Muslims from Muslim-majority countries to countries where Muslims form a minority. In these realities, practising Salafism would be inconvenient for the Muslims, to say the very least. At the very worst, it becomes the basis for violent Islamist movements such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to incite hatred and legitimise violence against the disbelieving majority.

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