

Of Norwegian Imams and mosques

Thursday 19 August 2010, by [TAJ Farhat](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2010).

Mosque is organised like a church as access to a mosque is through membership-an idea clearly borrowed, out of economic consideration, from the Norwegian State-Church relationship.

The Norwegian-Pakistanis came as labour migrants in the late 1960's and early 1970's from certain specific villages in Pakistan. Most of them came from class-based and hierarchical communities, where there is little participation of citizens in the state affairs. Pakistan has been under the military rule most of the time and many people have little opportunity to interact with anyone in the formal state authority. Moreover, the labour migrants had limited educational skills and in Norway, their Norwegian language command remained poor. Resultantly, they indulged themselves in hard work and for social interaction began living in close proximity with other migrants. For a common place of socialisation, they opened up mosques in rented buildings. They now required imams to lead in prayer and take care of the mosque. This led to the practice of 'importing' imams from Pakistan.

It is important to mention that religious leaders in the sense in which Christianity understands the concept, is alien to Islam. Islam, at least Sunni version, has no organised clergy. The Norwegian government with limited knowledge of this fact supported the mosques and imams in the same way they supported the State Church and Christian clergy in the light of the state-church alliance in Norway. Thus the government helped the mosques and imams to acquire a religious authority and socio-political influence that they never had back in Pakistan.

In Pakistan most mosques have no state support whatsoever. Every local Muslim community builds and maintains a mosque through donations. The community appoints an imam who is given boarding and lodging out of donations by the community. A higher educational qualification, secular or religious, is not required of an imam. It is enough that he can read the Arabic text of Quran and knows the method to lead the daily five-time Muslim prayers. The imam's tasks in the mosque are usually cleaning the mosque, making sure that prayer mats are rolled out, that call for prayer is made etc. The Imam has a low socio-economic status and depends on the community for his subsistence. The community provides his family a house near the mosque. Also, he is invited to homes to ritualise the marriage and funeral ceremonies. He is paid for such services. The mosque itself is strictly a place of worship, segregated from the socio-political activities. This does not necessarily mean that people are secular. This means that socio-political issues are handled at other platforms rather than a mosque.

To elaborate my point, I will give an example: A Norwegian prime minister went to an Oslo mosque to express his condolence to the Norwegian-Pakistani community after the devastating October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, for a similar purpose, the prime minister would have gone to a town hall, a cricket stadium or any other place that could accommodate the intended big crowd. A mosque would be the least probable place for the purpose: prime ministership is too high a status for a mosque.

Upon arrival in Norway, the imams are elevated to the position of religious leaders by the local Muslim community, and the state provides them all the appurtenances for the position.

The Muslim communities 'import' imams from villages or towns in Pakistan. More often than not, the imams are graduated from madrassas (seminaries), where a centuries-old curriculum is taught.

Some of these madrassas are accused by media, even by the government of Pakistan, for preaching *jihad* (holy war) against the non-Muslim and those fellow Muslim who do not fit into their narrow version of Islam. Further, these imams often have no exposure to a multi-religious milieu. Also, the imams often do not speak the Norwegian language thus unable to effectively communicate with the second generation Muslims who grew up in Norway.

The results are obvious. Political disputes over mosques (in 2006 two groups came to fists at the Central Ahl-e-Sunnat Mosque, Oslo); disagreements between the imams and the Norwegian Muslims (e.g. some Norwegian-Pakistan imams issued a decree that chicken slaughtered in Norway is not halal. Many Muslim restaurant and grocery shops owner and Muslim chicken eaters rejected the decree), and giving an inflexible interpretation of Islam that attributes evils of the world to non-Muslims and the 'wayward' Muslims. All this is not helping the inter-religious harmony in Norway.

Further, some Norwegian-Pakistani mosques conduct faith-based arbitrations in family law disputes. This is a disputed territory linked to the ongoing debates in the West about the compatibility of Islamic family law with women's civil rights. Some features of the Islamic family law, like polygamy, man's unilateral right to divorce, rules of property inheritance and custody of child, are not compatible with the women's civil rights in the Norwegian law. Thus some mosques may be the venues that hinder women's access to the rights sanctioned in the Norwegian law. In Pakistan, mosques have no role in the resolution of the family disputes, which are resolved at family level or taken to the court of law.

Moreover, in Norway a mosque is organised like a church. For example, access to a mosque is through membership-an idea clearly borrowed, out of economic consideration, from the Norwegian State-Church relationship. The Norwegian state finances every registered church and mosque at the rate of per head per member. Mosque-membership is a completely alien idea to Pakistan where mosque is a house of God that belongs to all Muslims. Anyone, any time can come to the mosque to pray or stay overnight. A traveller who cannot afford a hotel can stay at mosque and is served food by the community (in towns, this practice is almost disappearing but on countryside, it goes on). In Pakistan most of the mosques have no state funding. In Norway, mosques compete with each other to increase their membership in order to have an increased financial support by the state.

In addition to this, the mosque, like a church in Norway, is responsible for the burial rituals of its members. In Pakistan, funeral rituals are performed part at home and part at any open space that would accommodate the funeral crowd, and finally the crowd follows the coffin to the graveyard for burial. Interestingly, funerals at the Norwegian mosques have a better gender balance unlike Pakistan where women are not supposed to offer funeral prayers. Muslim women in Norway participate in all the funeral ceremonies at mosques and accompany the dead body to the graveyard. Many people wear black dress and bring flowers to the funeral ceremony. In Pakistan, women mourn a death at home. There is no particular funeral dress and only the close family member arrange for the flowers. Thus the Muslim funeral ceremonies in Norway have been adapted to some features of the Christian burial ceremonies.

Farhat Taj

P.S.

* From Viewpoint online issue no. 2, May 28, 2010:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=Of%20Norwegian%20Imams%20and%20mosques&f=full-4-may-28.php&y=2010&m=may>

* Farhat Taj is a research fellow at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Research, University of Oslo and a member of Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy. She can be reached at bergen34 yahoo.com