

“Islam and secularism are totally compatible”

Tuesday 15 November 2011, by [MUSTAFA Seema](#), [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 11 November 2011).

“Secularism is not about lifestyle, it is about ideology and thought. Some of the most liberal souls in South Asia have practiced the worst kind of fundamentalist politics, using their positions to sow the seeds of conservative thought,” says Seema Mustafa. A leading Indian journalist, peace activist and public intellectual, Seema Mustafa also contributes for Viewpoint. In an interview, she discusses different aspects of secularism in the Muslim world. Read on:

Farooq Sulehria - Why has secularism not taken root in the Muslim world? If Islam and secularism are incompatible?

Seema Mustafa - Islam and secularism are totally compatible, as is any religion practiced in its true sense. Syria, Libya and Iraq earlier did try to develop as secular states keeping religion out of politics. Last month I was in Syria and in a long conversation, the Grand Mufti in Damascus made it very clear that there was no room for religion in politics, that organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood were unacceptable so long as they insisted on mixing the two, and that the secular character of the Syrian state would not be compromised.

I strongly believe that secularism has not taken root in parts of the Muslim world—I hesitate to club all countries together---because it is always easier for rulers, Dynastic or otherwise, to use religion to consolidate nations. The powerful appeal and threat that defines the use of religion in politics is used to mesmerize and subdue the populace in a manner that eventually becomes autocratic, repressive and brutal. Unfortunately even the leaders professing secularism in the Arab countries have not remained immune from autocratic rule, and have used force to suppress opinion and dissent.

In Turkey, Tunis, and Bangladesh where secularism was granted a constitutional status, we have seen the growth of Islamists of various hue. In Somalia, Afghanistan, and Yemen where left captured power, hardcore radical Islamist forces have come to dominate the polity. What explains these secularist failures?

I am not going into specifics as there are details peculiar to each of these countries you have mentioned. But speaking generally, secularism has to absorb, modify, interact, convince. And this has to be done through persuasion and not force. Unfortunately in some countries force has been used instead of persuasion and that always allows fundamentalists to gain ground.

Also, Opposition in the Muslim countries to largely secular regimes has used religion to consolidate its support base, as it is easier (as we have seen in South Asia) to mobilize on grounds of religion

than on the basis of a concrete, comprehensive alternative agenda. This also suits the agenda of countries like Saudi Arabia, proxies at best for US hegemony.

Many Muslim leaders considered secular were in fact repressive dictators. Can we have secularism and tyranny simultaneously? Isn't it the case that secularism is and should be a by-product of democratic revolutions?

Yes of course. Secularism ideally should be a by-product of democratic revolutions but then this world is far from ideal. In my view it is great to see many leaders adopt the secular mantle, despite the dissent within. Theirs has not been an easy path to follow and yet they did keep fundamentalism at bay while in power. Unfortunately unbridled power and dynastic rule creates repression, that has not been effectively challenged in the region. It must be pointed that often governments in so-called democratic and secular nations have been repressive and guilty of human rights violations. And if the US and Nato had not intervened the secular states would have found it easier, in the long term, to get rid of dictators than the repressive, religious regimes.

Secularists in Pakistan keep painting Jinnah as a secular leader mere because he did not dine, wine and dress like conservatives. Even Gen. Musharraf was 'hailed' in certain liberal discourses as secularist owing to his 'liberal' ways of life. Can somebody be a secular while practicing confessional politics like Jinnah or Musharraf who was not conservative in his social outlook but patronizing Taliban, and was a dictator?

Secularism is not about lifestyle, it is about ideology and thought. Some of the most liberal souls in South Asia have practiced the worst kind of fundamentalist politics, using their positions to sow the seeds of conservative thought. Instead of striking out with an aggressively secular agenda they find it easier to compromise with the extremists in their land, encouraging and in many cases even nurturing them. Leaders like General Musharraf, patronized the Taliban as many did before him (Benazir Bhutto for one) without bothering to analyse the consequences it would have for secular thought and the nation.

In India, Islamist forces find refuge in secularism. But in Pakistan, Islamists have issued fatwas against secularism. Similarly, large sections of diasporic Muslims living with rights guaranteed by secularist polity, want their respective countries to go Islamic. What explains this conflicting attitude?

Ignorance, and an unquestioning belief that religion can be the balm for all ills. This is because nations have not developed, and the people have been led to believe by the political class that religion can answer all the problems of non-governance. In India the Muslims are in a minority and feel secure with the secular doctrine and Constitution that gives them complete protection. In Pakistan for instance the Muslims are in an overwhelming majority and instead of using secularism to move forward, often give in to the appeal of religiosity.

What should be done to foreground the secularist ideas in the Muslim world and occlude the hegemony of anti-secularist discourses?

Difficult question as a great deal has to be done but there is no uniform solution. What holds good for Pakistan is certainly not the way to go in Yemen, or Syria or any other country for that matter. There is a certain uniqueness that has to be respected along with a general resolve that secularism is the only way for true justice and peace.

P.S.

* Published under the title “Indian Muslims feel secure under secularism” by VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 76, NOVEMBER 11, 2011:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/indian-muslims-feel-secure-under-secularism.html>

* Farooq Sulehria is working with Stockholm-based Weekly Internationalen (www.internationalen.se). Before joining Internationalen, he worked for one year, 2006-07 at daily The News, Rawalpindi. Also, in Pakistan, he has worked with Lahore-based dailies, The Nation, The Frontier Post and Pakistan. He has MA in Mass Communication from Punjab University, Lahore. He also contributes for Znet and various left publications in Europe and Australia.