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CAN ALLAH BE MONOPOLISED BY ANY COMMUNITY?

Asghar Ali Engineer

Of late I have been receiving questions about the controversy these days in Malaysia about 'Allah' as Malay Muslims are objecting to the use of word 'Allah' by Catholic Christians. The Malays feel only Malay Muslims can use the word Allah and Christians cannot. The case was fought right about the High Court and the high court of Malaysia also allowed the use of word Allah by Christians. However, the Government of Malaysia suspended the Supreme Court verdict for the time being. It is not because the Government is trying to defy the orders of Highest Court but because the controversy has become politically unmanageable due to overcharged emotions.

The Roman Catholics translate the word God in their Malay language paper *Herald* as Allah and hence the controversy. Of late violence has erupted and a few days ago some three churches were attacked with firebombs and one was extensively damaged. The religious extremists are determined to inflict their views on others. Malaysia, like India, is a multi-religious society and by and large it has remained peaceful except when violence had erupted in late sixties between Malays and Chinese.

But again relations between Malays and Christians or Malays and Hindus erupt or situation becomes tense. All multi-religious societies experience inter-communal or inter-religious tensions in some or more degrees. All Malays are Muslims and constitute about sixty per cent of Malaysia's population. In Malaysia, Malays and Muslims have become synonymous. As mostly weaker sections of society embrace Islam in the hope of equality and justice, in Malaysia too, poorer sections embraced Islam and Malays till recently were poor and backward. However, now most of them are well educated and economically better off.

The Malays who oppose the use of word Allah by Christians, argue that this will confuse ordinary Malays and in view of missionary activities of Catholic Christians, they may convert to Christianity and they want to ward off this confusion among Malays. This may have its own *rationale* but the problem has to be solved through dialogue and mutual understanding. But the problem is that some politicians would like to exploit such controversies to their benefit.

In fact those who object to use of word Allah by Christians are on weak grounds. As Allah is one and creator of all of us cannot be monopolized by any one religious, much less linguistic community. The word Allah in Arabic was in use before Islam appeared on the scene in Mecca. As Maulana Azad points out in his *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* the word Allah is derived linguistically from pre-Islamic 'eel' as in Jibra'il or Israfil etc. The word in Hebrew was also *iloh* or *ilah* and by adding 'al' (which in English is used for 'the'). Thus al-ilah (the God) became Allah in Arabic and was used for supreme God.

In fact Muslims should welcome if non-Muslims too use the word Allah for God or Ishwar etc. How can one object to use of Allah by others? Anyone who learns Arabic and talks about God will have to use word Allah. All Christian Arabs freely use word Allah in countries like Jordan,

Egypt, Lebanon etc. No one objects to use of the word Allah. At least I do not know whether any Muslim Arab ever objected to such use.

I was in Lebanon in late nineties for a Christian-Muslim dialogue and we decided to visit mosque on Friday and a church on Sunday. We Muslims offered *salah* (prayer) on Friday and Christians sat in one place till prayer was over and we discussed with the imam of the mosque certain inter-communal problems. Similarly we Muslims observed the service in the church on Sunday while Christians in the group participated in the service.

The priest who was delivering sermon in Arabic was using the word Allah only and had rosary (*tasbeeh*) in his hand like the Imam in the mosque. If a curtain had been drawn between us and the priest I would have felt as if Imam in the mosque was delivering *khutba* in the mosque. Of course there were theological differences but otherwise Arabic language made us feel one.

As I always maintain any language exists prior to any religion and not otherwise. A religion uses a language which pre-exists it. More than one religious community can use the same language and terminology of both the religions would appear very similar. In fact in Lebanon Christians have rendered yeoman service to Arabic language and it is Christians who have prepared dictionary of modern Arabic *Al-Munjid* which is consulted by all Arab scholars of modern Arabic.

No language can be monopoly of any one religious community. In India too many Hindus learnt Arabic and Persian which was court language and they fluently spoke Persian and even wrote poetry in Persian like Chandrabhan Brahman. There were several first rate Urdu poets who were and still are Hindus and they use words like 'Khuda and Allah in their poetry. How can one object to that.

And as for fear that use of word Allah by Christians would confuse Malay Muslims and they may convert to Christianity is not a well grounded fear. Only those who feel their religion is followed without much conviction can entertain such fears. And for Malays their very identity and existence is based on Islam and as pointed out above, Malay and Muslims have become identical. How can then such fear be justified?

When one Malay Muslim had converted to Islam a few years ago there was such a hue and cry and Shariah court sentenced her and she had to revert to Islam, then how can such a fear be justified that there will be mass conversion to Christianity. And in modern democratic society one cannot stop conversion through fear of law. If any one converts to other religion it is between him/her and Allah. In matters religious one is answerable only to God, not to any human being.

However, matter is really not religious but political. The majority community feels it would be reduced to minority and hence it resists any conversion to other religions. In India the Hindutva forces are enacting laws in the BJP ruled states to stop Hindus converting to other religions like Christianity or Islam but welcome if any Muslim or Christian converts to Hinduism. Thus political benefit and not conversion is the issue. In a truly democratic society what matters is democratic and fundamental rights not conversion to or from majority community religion. It

should be purely an individual decision whether to convert to or from any one religion to another religion. Otherwise our democratic rights would be in great danger.

And as rightist forces and extremists make big issue out of nothing to create a scare against minority the rightwing extremists in Malaysia also have tried to create such a controversy. And as in India when the BJP raised such a controversy about Ramjanambhoomi temple, the Congress Government under Narsimha Rao allowed Babri Masjid to be demolished. The Malaysian Government too is scared and is afraid of implementing the High Court judgment for the time being.

Any multi-religious or multi-cultural democracy does not work smoothly in ideal sense. Even advanced western countries are facing problems of inter-religious tensions. In France there is often tension between African Muslims and white French. It is not so much religious but economic and political and also rightist forces are behind such eruptions.

Recently the French Government of Sarkozy which is rightist in ideology has proposed ban on *burqa* and if someone puts it on it proposes to impose fine of 750 Euros which is huge amount. Now it is ridiculous for an advanced democracy to dictate what one should or should not wear. The French rightist government has denounced *burqa* as 'prison' and even if it is, it is not business of government to dictate the nature of dress.

However, the socialist left is opposing such a ban though they also consider *burqa* quite undesirable but they do not consider it desirable to ban it. Thus after all it is not secularism which is in danger as the French Government feels and rationalizes its action with but their own political power. As religion cannot be in danger by deeds of few extremists, secularism cannot be in danger just because a few women wear *burqa* in France and yet we see how French government is creating scare and how it is dealing with the subject.

In many countries with multi-religious structure the right wing among religious majority community has been suppressing voice of reason successfully. The moderates are being silenced through creating mass hysteria. There is great need for civil society to play its role and support enlightened policies. Most of the moderate intellectuals have no time or interest to study the issue in depth and become victims of high pitched propaganda.

We need what we call public intellectuals who raise voice of reason and take public stand even risking their own reputation, or even career. Most of our moderate intellectuals argue why we should bother about such things and give way to such extremist forces. We should always be ready like Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre or Noam Chomsky to fearlessly criticize the powers that be in keeping with their conviction. What is the use of conviction which does not inspire you to speak out irrespective of consequences? Be it controversy about Allah or *burqa* or crime of Zionists or rigidity of orthodoxy. They alone can save democracy.

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