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ISLAM – CAPITALISM OR SOCIALISM

Asghar Ali Engineer

A few days ago a press conference was held in Mumbai by some Muslim organizations including some Muslim theologians claiming that Islam is against capitalism and imperialism and that we would launch a campaign against both. It is indeed a crude attempt to compare or contrast modern political ideologies with Islam which originated in 7th century Arabia.

Islam has its central values like truth, justice and equality of all human beings. But these are core values of Islam which very favourably compare with modern concept of human rights, human dignity and social justice. But modern economic conditions and political ideologies have their own origin which has nothing to do with the economic conditions prevailing after Islam appears on the Arabian scene.

On my visit to Cairo a few decades ago I found a book *Al-Yamin wa Al-Yasar fi'l Islam* (the right and left in Islam). I found this book quite interesting as the entire discussion in the book is with reference to the then prevailing conditions and how the first four rightly guided Caliphs followed different economic policies which had deep impact on social conditions in the Islamic world.

Another book in this respect was published in 1977 by Prof. Khurshid Ahmed Fariq, who taught Arabic in Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. The title of the book is *KLhilafat-e-Rashida ka Iqtisadi Jai'za* i.e. economic survey of the period of Rightly Guided Caliphs. This book also discussed economic conditions then prevailing without any reference to modern ideologies.

Undoubtedly Islam tried to create a just society in every respect as justice happens to be its core value and it was this core value of Islam which made W.C. Smith, a noted Islamic scholar who taught at Government College Lahore in thirties of last century that Islam was the first systematic attempt in human history to create a socio-economically just society. But soon, this attempt failed as much depended on personal inclinations of the Caliphs rather than on any systematic ideology.

According to the Egyptian author of *Al-Yameen wa al-Yasar fi'l Islam* Hazrat Abur Bakr and Hazrat Umar in the early period of his Khilafat followed centrist economic policies but in the later period he took advice of Hazrat Ali seriously and became rigorous in enforcing economically just policies. However, it was rather late as soon after that he was assassinated by his slave.

But Hazrat Usman, being a lenient administrator, came under pressure and changed land policy which Hazrat Umar had followed and allowed companions of the Prophet to exchange their border land for land in Hijaz and this caused much turmoil and also as Hazrat Uthman, according to Khurshid Ahmed Fariq, gave generous gifts to his relatives and friends from Bait al-Maal and this too led to much unrest and ultimately civil war broke out. Of course there were more factors to it then only the policies of Hazrat Uthman.

Dr. Taha Husain, another eminent historian and scholar of Islam from Egypt discusses these factors in his book *Al-Fitnat al-Kubra* (The Great Insurrection). Some companions of the Prophet like Hazrat Talha and Hazrat Zubayr had accumulated lot of wealth. Thus we find in *Tabqat Ibn Sa'd* that when they dies they left behind great deal of Gold and silver and more than 1000 horses and large number of slaves. Prof. Khurshid Ahmed Fariq, quoting sources estimates that Hazrat Uthman left behind 1 crore and 60 lakh dirhmas when he was assassinated and all this was looted by the insurrectionists who had surrounded his house.

Let us remember that this wealth was generated from two sources: one, from trade and two, by way of *ghanima* i.e. loot in the wars of conquests and Baladhuri has given figures in his *Futuh al-Buldan* i.e. Conquest of Countries. With these conquests the whole economic scenario especially of Bedouin Arabs changed and they began to lead comfortable life.

We should also remember that the then Arab economy was basically mercantile economy which depended on trade and production of date palms from few oases. Thus it cannot be compared with modern industrial economy and its problems. And with development of monarchy with Yazid the economy underwent further change and it became more feudal than mercantile.

Thus one must understand these specificities of the then Islamic society before comparing it with modern political and economic ideologies. However, one can say that the greatest contribution of Islam was the concept of welfare state and establishment of *Bait al-maal* in its early stages. But with establishment of monarchy and feudalization, Bait al-Maal also ceased to be as source of welfare of people.

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