ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS: THE REDUCTION OF MUSLIMS' SELF CONFIDENCE IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of the media in this age of information technology in diminishing Muslims' self confidence. The propaganda of the West and the war it has been waging on Islamophobic sentiments intensified after the September 11 tragedy in 2001, to which the image of Islam has been more tarnished like never before, leading to the loss of self-confidence amongst Muslims in representing Islam. By recourse to textual analysis of selected printed and electronic media from Western as well as Muslim countries, this paper finds that the media has played a significant role in constructing public opinion on Islam and to a great extent has resulted in the increase of Islamophobic sentiments among non-Muslims in addition to the loss of Muslim self-confidence. Since the media is controlled by Western elites and corporations, the information on this broader Islamic threat have been overwhelmingly anti-Islamist in orientation and opposed the influence of Islam on the social and political life of Muslims. 'Islamic' sources of information, on the other hand, have also been misleadingly triumphant in tone, trumpeting success that has been exaggerated or unrepresentative of broader trends. This paper suggests that Islamically-oriented sources should strategically position and reconstruct Islam more meaningfully and effectively when tackling public opinion.

Keywords: Islamophobia, self-confidence, media, constructing opinion, and propaganda

Introduction

In his book, *Information and the Muslim World: A Strategy for the Twenty First,* Ziauddin Sardar says that "... it is a time to say that we live in the information age."[1] In saying this, Sardar reminded us of two developments: the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) globally, and the necessity for Muslims in utilizing the ICT to develop modern Muslim society.

However, after twenty years Muslims have yet to develop their own communications system, and are still dependent on the West for their technology.

Moreover, Muslims' self-confidence has gradually diminished in this age of ICT, especially when they have to counter the West and media. This is evident in several incidents of clashes of civilizations whereby Muslims manifest an inferiority complex when countering Western media reports, especially.

Barely hours after the September 11 tragedy, the Western media, especially in the United States, declared Muslim fundamentalists were behind the attack. Since then, Muslims have felt uneasy with the West. Though they have cursed the purported actors behind the attacks, Muslims still indicated a sense of guilt with Western society.

On the other hand, the Western media and political elite have intentionally portrayed Muslims as being uncivilized, extremist and as terrorists. What factors triggered the loss of Muslims' self-confidence? What is the impact of this inferiority complex among Muslims? What are the possible remedies that can resolve the problem faced by Muslims in relations to the West?

Cultural Invasion: Theoretical Perspective

There are two significant factors that may be useful in explaining and analyzing Muslims' inferiority complex towards the West in the Information Age. First is the imbalance of information between developing countries, especially between Muslim and western countries; second is intercultural communications.

Developed western countries dominate the information flowing to developing countries. In this way, Islamic countries are not only consumers of information from the West, but have become dependent on the western media for the latest information. Majid Tehranian asserts that the world is nowadays facing the challenge of "Pan-Capitalism,"[2] that is, informational imperialism that purports to celebrate and propagate multiculturalism on the one hand, but indirectly undermines cultures other than western cultures, on the other. The players of Pan-Capitalism are the developed countries and underdeveloped countries, although the latter have become the former's object of imperialism.

Furthermore, Majid argues, informational imperialism has taken place through "... co-modifying culture, it unwittingly privileges cultural identity. But its inability to correct the social and economic dislocations of growth has caused a culturally-grounded political resistance..."[3]

In this case, the Western media has made Muslim communities (*ummah*) a hostage to history, showing Islam and its adherents in such negative images as being associated with militancy, fundamentalism, radicalism, and war.

Secondly, the flow of information from western countries to the Muslim world can be explained further through intercultural communication theory. In spreading out the information, there is process of cultural penetration to the Muslim world. This involves the transformation by the western media of Muslim culture involving beliefs, values, attitude systems, worldview, and social organization.[4]

In the case of information imbalance between Muslim and Western media, Muslim communities have been attacked by the Western media in terms of both quantity and quality of content.

The western media broadcasts imbalanced information, using its own cultural terms and perspective. In other words, all information is fed and broadcasted through the West's own perspective and worldview. As a result, the content of information that flows from the western media to the Muslim world promotes the former's own culture and values. While western media claims to be objective and

factual, they inculcate their own *beliefs, values, attitude systems and worldviews* in the information broadcasted to the Muslim world.

Failure to Maintain Muslim Identity

Though there are many factors that have caused the inferiority complex of Muslims towards the West, the most significant contributing factor is the erosion of Muslim identity and commitment to Islam. This does not mean that it is these internal factors that make Muslims feel inferior. There have also been significant external factors that contributed to the situation.

Muslims are aware that Islamic authenticity relies on the Qur'an and Hadith, not on the sentiments of Muslim communities. Islam as a comprehensive way of life encompasses beliefs, values, attitude systems, worldviews, and social organization, which are decidedly different from other, including western, norms and cultures. Even the Islamic creed ('Aqidah), laws (Shari'ah), and ethics (Akhlaq) collide with the Western beliefs system.

It is not surprising, thus, that while western culture permits people to consume alcohol and usury, both have been prohibited in Islam. Similarly, the position of western societies on interaction between males and females is also not the same. Both are related to the West's views on absolute freedom that are in contrast to Islam and according to which absolute freedom is for the satisfaction of their selves, while freedom in Islam is relative and conditional on sincerity "ikhlas."

There are other elements of beliefs, values, attitude systems, worldviews, and social organizations in Islam that are contrary to Western culture. But due to the weakness of Muslims in abiding Islamic teachings, Muslims have failed to maintain their Islamicity. This does not mean Muslims do not believe in the Oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the Qur'an and Hadith, nor in the life hereafter. The Islamic identity includes the declaration, conformation, and application of Islam. Identity begins with the mindset and worldview that everything must begin from Islamic principles. This means that all interactions between Muslims and other people should consider the norms and values of Islam. This is not ethnocentricity. It is a consequence of declaring oneself as a Muslim. Rationally, therefore, they should identify themselves as Muslims.

Muslims from Jakarta to Casablanca have failed to maintain their Islamicity in terms of maintaining the way of thinking and worldview. Muslims think and talk in the ways of western societies. Instead of manifesting the Islamic worldview and way of thinking, they have adopted the western way of thinking, especially on various issues such as political, economic, social, security and defense issues.

Due to various factors such as lack of access to information on Islamic principles, illiteracy, and lack of opportunity to study Islam, Muslims have become gradually ignorant of their own religion. Muslim scholars who have been educated in western educational systems also tend to justify western projects with Islamic values. Muslims became the target for their agenda of cultural imperialism to weaken Islamic values and their Muslim identity, to plant the Western model amongst Muslims, especially the youth. As a result, Muslims have become ignorant of and blind to the beauty of Islamic teachings and principles.

Western Projects and "Inferiority Complex"

Many people are not aware that the inferiority complex of Muslims towards the West is a result of systematic efforts projected and implemented across the Muslim world. The "inferiority complex" project among Muslims supported by the Western media and its associates is part and parcel of secularization which has been implanted in the process of modernization. In the beginning, secularization was only meant to separate religion from politics, and religion from social phenomena. God's matter was to be rendered to God, and the king's matter to the king. This value was supported by the mass media. Religion is a private matter, they argue, and social and political problems are not related with religion as they make up 'public' affairs and should be solved accordingly.

The project of secularization was eventually carried out by Muslims themselves conditioned by their western education. Across the Muslim world, from Kemal Ataturk of Turkey to Nurcholis Majid of Indonesia, they became agents of so-called modernization and secularization. To them, secularism is not problematic and, in fact, became the purported solution to the 'predicament' faced by Muslims. Gradual acceptance of secularism among the Muslim communities brought Muslims further away from Islamic teachings, and they became ignorant of Islam as a comprehensive way of life that offers solutions to mankind's problems.

Another platform for secularization has been through providing fund and grants for Muslim academics and researchers to pursue their higher education in western universities. Young Muslims are invited and welcomed to pay visit and study in western countries, meet persons who would teach them not only about the sciences, but also about western culture and values, and development of the west and what should be imitated in their respective developing countries. In this category, the hospitality from the western people during their stay in the west would make them feel proud of the western civilization and consequently inform and spread out the issues of development of the west amongst their colleagues in their respective countries.

This project has been going on even before, and after 9/11. Apart from the student exchanges and sponsorships, there have been opportunities granted to Muslim elites, journalists, activists and government officers to visit the west. These opportunities were accorded to affirm that western culture is superior. As a result, many Muslims have become impressed with the hospitality and efficiency of western societies, triggering uncritical exercises in self-introspection on Islam and development and the western formula of development.

The third project of secularization has been through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whereby Muslims are encouraged to drive a reform agenda according to the aims and purposes of their western fund providers emphasizing goals related to democratization, equality of gender, religious reformation, human rights, environment and 'lifestyle' matters such as those related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues.

The fourth project has been to paint Islamic history in very negative and dark colors, where Muslims are thought of as terrorists, stagnant and backwards. Many acts to humiliate the Prophet Muhammad have been carried out in various forms. Jayland Posten for example, caricatured the Prophet as a terrorist. Muslim historical

and contemporary leaders have elsewhere been reconstructed, mostly by Orientalist, as womanizers, arrogant, excessive and selfish. Pope Benedict XVI in his speech in Regensburg University, Germany, on September 12, 2006, revived the rhetoric about jihad and, quoting the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel II, said, "Show me what has been brought by Muhammad is nothing except the satanic verses and inhumanity such as spreading faith by sword".[5] In a speech delivered on September 20, 2001, then-US president George W Bush, Jr., alleged that al-Qaeda was behind the September 11 incident. He also judged Osama bin Laden is being the leader of al-Qaeda and its networks of cells spanning 60 countries with Afghanistan as its center of operations.[6]

Islam is thus referred to only as a source of terror and a threat against western and non-western peoples. The western media perpetually ties terrorism to Muslims, or their faith and beliefs system. Muslims are made to feel dishonorable and ashamed by the 'disclosure' of the Muslim perpetrators behind the September 11 tragedy.

The western media has effectively portrayed Islam as intolerant and anti-West. While the September 11 tragedy became a bench mark and icon for the western media to ascribe to Islam the association with terrorism, even prior to the September 11 tragedy, some western media have not hesitated to describe Islam as a religion of the sword. TIME magazine for example, repeatedly referred to "the sword of Islam" in its June 15, 1992 edition, as well as its August 30, 1993, and October 4, 1993 editions.[7] There have been many other negative reports on Islam on the radio, television, and in the movies.

As a result of such reconstructions of Islam and Muslims in the West, Muslims have become hesitant, have no confidence, and are even confused about their status as 'the best people' (*khaira ummah*) and their religion as a mercy for the universe. Consequently, it is relatively true what has been said by Ahmed that "in history there was no threat for Muslims like the western media did... The Western media exist everywhere, and never stop and never give any chance. The media searches and attacks without limit; no mercy for the weak people."[8] Further, he argues that its attack strategically focused on Muslims, while Muslims did not afford to protect themselves.[9]

Political figures and the media in the West often cooperate hand in hand to denigrate Islamic history. Oryana Flashy, whose books and articles on Islam and Muslims did not differentiate between radical Muslims and moderate ones, figured prominently in Pope Benedict's network of advisors and writers. Former President Bush, coincidentally, in effect congratulated Pope Benedict for his Regensburg University speech.

Ironically, the more radical the response from the Muslims, the more cold the west reacts. They in fact support and protect each other directly or indirectly when there is an attempt of attack, such as humiliating the Prophet, the Qur'an, and other symbols of Islam. They are firm in supporting each other in any way to deprive Islam. When Muslims protested against Denmark about the caricature, all western countries hasten to publish the caricature.

Moreover, the support was also seen when Muslims protested against Salman Rushdie's work on Satanic verses. The west considered him as Galileo in the modern age, which is against religious doctrines. In fact, the British protected him up to the present day from any protest from Muslims across the Muslim world. Likewise, the

west also used to appreciate any person or groups of Muslims who attempt to deprive Islam.

Draining Muslims' Energy as a Main Target

In this era of neo-imperialism, the imbalance of information has been exploited for the West's new mission of hegemony, not with the sword but the word. There have been attacks, directly and indirectly, against the *beliefs, values, attitudes, worldviews, and social organizations* of Muslim countries. In this way, Muslims' energies have been distracted and drained in order to respond to Western propaganda via several means.

Firstly, Muslims' energy have been drained by the use of words such as 'holy war', 'jihad', militancy', 'radicalism', 'terrorism', etc, to humiliate and change Islam.[10] All committed Muslims are provocatively called 'fundamentalist' in the same negative manner as the disparagement of Christianity. This term has been referred to those who referred literally to the text of the New Testament, which resulted to stagnancy, backwardness, and extremism. In the West, the word has also been referred to as political activities, extremism, fanatics, terrorism, and anti-Americans.[11] By draining Muslims' energy in this way, it also distracts them by brow-beating them into looking inwardly.

Secondly, Islamic values of goodness have been gradually seized. The project of inferiority complex has been inspired by liberalist to engage Muslims as they would gradually accept the concept of freedom in their life style. Beyond this project, the west wanted to seize Islam as it has been known as intolerant, and anti-freedom, which apparently against the basic values of the West, especially tolerance and liberalism.[12] Lacking self confidence on the goodness of their religious values, Muslims could simply feel that it is difficult to teach Islam publicly in contrast to other religious teachings. Muslims are finally faced with inferiority complex due to the western media's outburst on Islam's shortcomings by showing that Islam is associated with terror, skepticism towards Muhammad's prophethood, the attack on the Qur'an, the call for reformation of Islam, and finally propagating that the western system is the alternative response to the backwardness of Islam.

Thirdly, there have been continuous efforts on taxing the economic resources of Muslims. The western lifestyle -- from food preferences to household furniture -- has penetrated societies all over the world. Adopting the western style has taken a toll in terms. Many Muslims paid millions of dollars only to gain IWPs (incentive white persons) from the west. As Esposito has argued, the heroes and heroines in western media are, more often than not, of a particular skin color. If brown-skinned people were to come up to the status of whites, therefore, they would have to change the color of their skin on top of their lifestyles and ways of thinking.[13] From cosmetic products to petroleum, millions of dollars are flying to the west as a result of Muslims buying up its products.[14]

Finally, western strategists are aware of Islam's extraordinary power when Muslims are aware of their common enemy for five decades. They witnessed the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence when it became a global power against Communism in 1970s and 1980s. The demarcation and strengthening of Muslim

groupings to distinguish one from the other and the weakening of Muslim solidarity and networking has been the main means by which the West tackled Islam as threat to western hegemony. They have, thereby, used Muslims to asunder Muslims. Muslim elites are now up against other Muslim groups. Muslim intellectuals are suspicious of other Muslim intellectuals. Muslim grassroots are up against the powerful elite classes.

From Sudan to Indonesia, Islamic resurgence blazed across the Muslim world in the 1990s. Ruling parties as well as opposition leaders used religious sentiments to seek ascendancy, legitimacy and support from their own people. Muslim activists gained a significant number of parliamentary and cabinet seats in Jordan, Sudan, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Muslim activists joined the opposition and non-government organizations in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and the West Bank and Gaza. They contested and participated in their own national elections. Islam has come to be regarded as a significant factor in nationalist struggles in Afghanistan, Soviet Union and Kashmir, and other Muslim countries in the Middle East. Muslims participated in liberation struggles such as in Lebanon, India, Thailand, China and the Philippines.[15]

All of the above has made the West rethink about their strategy when Islam posed as a potential threat to its hegemony. With the collapse of Communism, "looking for a new enemy is basically to test their power after the collapse of the Communism," and Islam thereby became the target of "their choice".[16]

Telling the Truth: Reconstructing Muslims' Self Confidence

The western media is very instrumental in the process of diminishing Muslims' confidence. In fact, it seems to be more significant than the issues that were broadcasted in their coverage. A case in point, one of the western citizens was captured and accused in a conflicted area, Lebanon. He was considered as a member of an Islamic group. The western media broadcasted it continuously and was capitulated as an indication for a certain incident that maybe repeated in the near future. It has been systematically broadcasted as if every western Muslim citizen and Muslims as a whole are threat to the West.

Furthermore, any attempt by Muslim groups to fulfill Islamic laws in their own countries – even through peaceful and democratic without conflict and physical destruction – is portrayed in terms of the threat or challenge of Islamization by Muslim hardliners. When a local government in Indonesia sought to issue local regulations and laws based on the *Shari'ah,* the western media and their affiliates in Indonesia broadcasted them as a back step and a revival of fundamentalism. When Muslims in France ask that the government allow Muslim women to wear scarves, the western media portrayed or reconstructed the news as the revival, manifestation or threat of Islamic fundamentalism.

Why does this happen? Because the western media and their affiliations in Muslim countries became "hidden persuaders", "mind-managers", "captains of consciousness", "electronic colonialists", "consent manufacturers", or "media imperialists" on Islam and Muslims, constructing imaginatively negative images of

Islam and its adherents through their imagination.[17] Terror and killings are purportedly acceptable to Muslims.

Bush and the western media tried to convince the world that al-Qaeda and the Afghan government under the leadership of Taliban were behind the September 11 attacks. In his speeches, Bush thus painted a picture of Taliban as an extremist regime and al-Qaeda as a terrorist group.[18] Muslims and non-Muslims, meanwhile, kept silent while witnessing the ensuing tragedy of Afghanistan. All media, except the underground media, broadcasted the same news and updates. None of Muslim countries dared to disagree.

The western media played a significant role also in constructing public opinion against the late Saddam Hussein's regime and its purported weapons of mass destruction program -- which have been proven false. Although the UN team of inspectors led by Hans Blix did not find any of the weapons, Iraq was accused of being non-cooperative. The US government with the assistance of their own media and affiliates sought to convince the world that Iraq was a dangerous country and urged that the world support the US in destroying Iraq. The US and its allies invaded Iraq in March 2003.

After destroying Iraq on April 14, 2003, the media constructed public opinions positively to gather public support for the cooperation between the western world and political fractions in Iraq and their administration and rebuilding of oil-rich Iraq, purportedly for the Iraqi people.

One may thus conclude that the people known as "hidden persuaders", "mind managers", "captains of consciousness", "electronic colonialists", "consent manufacturers", and "media imperialists" are responsible for the disharmonious relations between Islam and the West. It is their presence in the Muslim world that threatens human freedom. They are the real destroyers of human social harmony. They should be brought to court for their ill-intention in jeopardizing human civilization, and for implanting hatred, terror and war amongst mankind. They have committed a crime.

To rebuild the harmonious relations between Islam and the West, those who played the above roles regardless of religious and national affiliations, they should tell the truth, telling people facts devoid of imaginative portrayals of the 'Islamist' threat. Only then would their reports be based on fairness and justice. The aim of harmonious life, co-existence, and mutual respect, especially between Islam and the West, will be achieved when Muslims and non-Muslims appreciate each other and work towards maintaining each other's dignity and self confidence.

Endnotes

[1] Ziauddin Sardar, *Information and the Muslim World: A Strategy for the Twenty-first Century*, (London-New York: Manzell Publishing Limited, 1988), p.3.

[2] See Majid Tehranian, Global Communication and Worlds Politic, Domination, Development, and Discourser, (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

[3] Ibid., p. 27

[4] See Larry A, Samovar, at. al, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, (Belmont, California : Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981).

[5] The efforts to humiliate Islam and Muslims have been carried out by many Christian theologians since the Byzantine era in the 8th century following the rise of Islam. It has been repeated in different forms and presentations. The humiliation includes the allegation that Islam was not only apostasy from the Christianity as asserted by St. John (675-749), but as an aberration. Muhammad was described as the father of lies, the Antichrist, and the Qur'an as a false and fabricated book. Some theologians such as Pedro de Alfonso and Peter the Venerable contributed to the degradation of the Islamic image in western society. Through his *Summa conta Gentiles and De rationibus fidei contra Saeacenos, Grecos et Armenos*, Thomas Aquinas is considered among the most influential intellectuals to contribute to the degradation of the Islamic image. According to Azyumardi Azra, it was Aquinas who set the standard for West European society's perceptions of Islam. See *Republika*, March 31, 1993.

[6] Joseph S, Tuman, *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism*, Thousand Oaks-London-New-Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), pp. 92-102.

[7] *Ulumul Quran*, Jurnal Ilmu dan Kebudayaan, Vol. III No. 1 (Th. 1992); Vol. IV No. 5 (Th. 1993), p. 4. See John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 186

[8] Akbar S Ahmed, *Posmodernisme, Bahaya dan harapan bagi Islam* (ter), Bandung: Mizan, 1993), pp. 229-230.

[9] Ibid.

[10] John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, p. 18.

[11] Ibid., p. 17-18.

[12] Ibid., p. 209.

[13] Ibid., p. 233.

[14] See Abdulhay Y Zalloum, *Painting Islam As The New Enemy Globalization & Capitalism in Crisis*, (Kuala Lumpur: Crescent News Sdn. Bhd, 2003).

[15] John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, p. 21.

[16] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[17] Majid Tehranian, *Global Communication and the World Politics*, p. 131.

[18] Joseph S, Tuman, *Communicating Terror*, p. 95.