



Should There Be Islamic Rule in Somalia?

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October 13, 2016

“Everyone is ignorant, only on different subjects”

Will Rogers

Introduction

This article arose out of Hassan M. Abukar’s excellent article, “[Umal And Faisal: Clash of The Titans](#)” and the comments that followed (Wardheernews.com, September 21, 201), and is informed by the equally excellent article of Liban Ahmed, “[Religious Polarization Amongst Somalis](#)” (wardheernews.com, September 27, 2016). The topic of this article was put before a panel of three Somali professionals who were debating another topic before a Somali audience. Their replies were in no uncertain terms in support of secular governance and away from religion, and they sounded sacrilegious. That was captured in a YouTube, which has since gone viral. As a result, many Somali clerics were up in arms and were vociferous in their condemnation of two of the three professionals for what they had said.



Will Rogers was obviously right when he said: “Everyone is ignorant, only on different subjects”. Faisal and Mohammed Abdi stepped out of their purview by pronouncing themselves most emphatically on a most sensitive subject, which Nuraddin Farah was prudent to avoid discussing (thanks to Hassan M Abukar for that). Faisal sounded that he was rejecting Islam altogether, although he immediately blurted out some words that seemed to qualify his rejection.

Mohammed Abdi plunged deeper in the mud by adding that ‘the Americans’ (he did not say ‘founding fathers’) separated State and **Religion** (he did **not** say, ‘**Church** and State’), and that we (Somalis) should follow their example since they are more knowledgeable, more experienced, and wiser. The clerics, and Somalis in general, were incensed because that sounded as if what the Americans did was superior to what God had ordained. I have discussed in [my book](#) (“Governance: The Scourge and Hope of Somalia”) why the separation between Church and State, but not between Mosque and State. The Church governed: the Mosque never did. A politician answering that same question would have sounded so sanctimonious as to embrace enthusiastic support to the application of religion to everything. But Faisal Roble and Mohammed Abdi did not, unlike Nuraddin, weigh their words, having, I think, caught by surprise, and did not, apparently, realize the reverberations and repercussions of their utterances. These are two good people I know and respect; and, as far as I know, neither is irreligious.

However, I am writing this article in an effort to answer the same question to a wider group of people who may wish to have another viewpoint on the matter.

The Somali Clerics

Somali clerics are by and large making the same mistakes that many educated, westernized Somalis make. They are wading in difficult fields they are not familiar with when they pontificate on issues of state affairs and politics. Some of them even gave a religious explanation for the current conflict between Kenya and Somalia on the delineation of their maritime borders. They tend to weigh in matters that clearly lie outside their purview, not realizing that by doing so they run the risk of making themselves irrelevant, especially when some of them contend that Democracy, party politics, structures of Western polity are all un-Islamic, and even illicit. But they are not recommending Dictatorship either. Nor can the Somali men of the cloth tell us what Islamic polity should look like in today’s complex conditions of our world! This is because they do not know what different political systems, structures, and dynamics are, and how government works or should work.

As a matter of fact many of those clerics who preach sanctimoniously every day the adoption of Islamic rule do not even know Islam’s contribution to learning and human civilization, Islam’s occupation of and achievements in Spain over many centuries. Some of them have never heard of the Omayyads and the Abbasids . Their intellectual horizons are limited and they are thoroughly incapable of giving

us authoritative religious positions on the burning issues of the day such as birth control, autopsy, euthanasia, payment of interest in an inflationary economy, and many others. Yet, they are too quick to denounce and condemn people who do not agree with their interpretations of the Qur'an, and we all see *fatwas* flying left and right. But whose *fatwa* is right? By what right can any cleric issue a *fatwa*? And who has the duty to implement them? Without an effective government and a central council on religious affairs we are in for a big confusion and discord. We are even subjected to watching the ugly sight of religious 'scholars' insulting each other through the social media. I have even seen some of their Arab counterparts do the same. The great tragedy ensuing from all this is putting Islamic Rule in an unfavorable light which leads young people to reject it. Isn't this a disservice to Islam?

Educated Somalis

When we use the word 'educated' we run into difficulty. When do we call a person 'educated'? Formal education tends to *quantify* education because it sets different hierarchical levels of institutions (elementary, intermediate, secondary, university), and certification (bachelor, master, doctoral, professional, and post-doctoral). I suppose that is why we hear in the U.S. that so and so is '*more* educated' or '*more* qualified' than so and so, instead of '*better* educated' or '*better* qualified'.

'*More*' and '*better*' are relative terms that do not help us determine the level at which a person can be said to be 'educated'. The difficulty is that Somali clerics are also educated in their own various ways, (they are not all from religious colleges) and cannot simply be dismissed as 'uneducated'. In this article, however, I will use the word 'educated' to mean solely those who have attained at least their first degrees through the formal systems of secular education and who consider themselves modernized or westernized.

Many educated Somalis are mesmerized by the stupendous civilization of the West, particularly those who have little or no knowledge of prior civilizations on whose achievements Western Civilization itself was built. They look back at the relative backwardness of Muslim countries and Muslim societies and they blame it on Islam. It is true that many Muslims in Africa and Asia are less educated than others who were subject peoples in the colonial era (especially those who had been Christianized) because of their fierce resistance to a Christian colonial education spearheaded by missionaries. Such was the case in British Somaliland for decades from 1900 until the early 1940s when primary education was started

tentatively, and only after injecting Qur'anic studies into the curriculum. Such was the case too in Nigeria when the Muslim North also fiercely resisted colonial education owing to the same fears, with the result that it is less educated, even now, than the rest of the country.

In consequence of this lag in education there were those who believed in the not too-distant past (Ataturk being an illustrious example) and there, still, are others (Muslims among them) who believe that Islam is a backward religion that keeps its adherents from learning and progress.

It has been said that those who do not read have no advantage over those who cannot. Many educated Somalis cannot read the Qur'an; and if they can and do, cannot understand it properly. I was not surprised, therefore, to hear Sherif Baca of Los Angeles say to the US House Committee on Homeland Security that "Most Muslims don't even know what the Koran's all about.....These people don't know what is in their book" ([See this YouTube clip](#)).

Over the years I met a few educated Somalis who were so full of themselves that they dared describe the Qur'an as anachronistic and out of step with the times. Even then, some of them had received only their first degrees. But they thought they were so high-browed as to know better than everybody else. But there was one who was among the first to obtain a Ph.D. Immediately upon his return to the country I heard him criticize the Qur'an. I was truly astonished as he was a person I knew quite well. He was offended and angered when I told him that he was not qualified to say anything about the Qur'an because he could scarcely read it, much less understand its highly classical Arabic. He was angered further when I told him he should throw away his Ph.D. if it could not teach him the difference between what he knew and what he did not know. A Ph.D. (or any other academic degree) is not a license to claim authority on matters that lie outside one's own narrow field of specialization.

Education should teach us humility and should highlight the vast ocean of knowledge that exists to shame us, human beings, into pettiness. We are not gods: we are faulty human beings whose physical and mental sights are severely circumscribed. I would caution that if one wishes to say something about Islam, the Qur'an or the Prophet, another matter outside his or her scope of concentration he or she should, first of all, weigh the full import of what he or she says in order to avoid embarrassments.

Islam As A Religion of Peace And Progress

It is always wrong to judge a religion, not by what it teaches but by what some or even many of its adherents do, or how they behave. Those who carried out the Holocaust were Christians, the worst racists in Europe, America, and in Africa were Christians, and those who developed (and even used) weapons of mass destruction were Christians. But, it would be insane to blame this on Christianity- and no one, to my knowledge, did or does so. Why should, then, Islam be blamed for the nefarious actions of some of its wicked adherents?

Islam is a religion of peace and progress, and it encompasses all aspects of life. Early Western scholars who studied Islam wrote that it is “more than a religion: it is a way of life”. Its prescribed greeting is, “Peace be on you” and it enjoins us to “Have mercy on those on earth, and Heaven will have mercy on you”. It teaches us to meet people with a smile and a happy face; it teaches that we should exchange greetings whenever we meet and exchange gifts so we may love each other. It commands that the pursuit of knowledge is *obligatory* on ‘every Muslim man *and woman*’, and that we should pursue it from ‘the cradle to the grave’. It also teaches that we, as human beings, should work to develop this world tirelessly as though we are immortal, and work for the other (eternal) world as if we will die the next day. Yet, Muslims are the violators of this, **not** in bygone ages but in this day and age. Muslims in bygone ages have spearheaded human progress with notable contributions to Mathematics, Chemistry, Medicine, Philosophy, Jurisprudence, Art, and Navigation (interestingly, the word ‘Admiral’ comes from Amiral Bahre, which is Arabic, but so are Algebra and Chemia). The World still uses Arabic numerals, and the Zero which is an Arab invention is critical to mathematics. Moreover, Muslims established some of the oldest universities in the world in order to promote advanced learning. The oldest university in the World today is Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Nowadays, unfortunately, Muslim countries are full of obscurants who are against secular learning.

Islam is beautiful, but its human adherents are not angels. They are human beings with all their faults and foibles. Islam rests on five pillars: declaring one’s belief that ‘There is no God, but God, and that Muhammad is His prophet; performing five daily prayers; paying Zakat (tax on wealth, as well as poll tax) to the poor; fasting in Ramadan; and performing the Hajj once in a life-time, *if possible*. Zakat is different from giving alms: the former is obligatory and subject to calculation if it is on wealth; the latter is optional, and its size and timing are subject to the discretion of the giver. Apart from supplications to God the content of Islam is

about treating God's creatures (fellow human beings, animals, and the environment) in the best possible manner.

There is a prescribed Islamic culture, and it is not different from the noble culture of civilized people everywhere. This culture occupies a large part of Islam itself. That is why true Islam is a way of life. A well-known Egyptian Muslim scholar named, Sheikh Muhammad Abdo (otherwise, Mohammed Abdu) visited France in 1844 and made an often-quoted statement upon his return to Egypt. He said: "I returned from a country where the people are not Muslims but have the Islamic culture, to a country where the people are Muslims but do not have the culture of Islam." By this he meant that in Islam one has to be truthful, honest, and straightforward in one's dealings with people; one has to be friendly and meet people with a smile and a happy face; one has to give peace and be peaceful. He found this in France, but not in Egypt. There are anecdotes too of Somali refugees who, having been received with much kindness in Europe and North America, wondered why such good people were not Muslims knowing full well that their own correligionists in some Muslim countries have not only rejected them but have even mistreated them. Human decency is Islamic. But, if Muslims have abandoned the culture of their own creed why do many of them call for 'Islamic Rule'?

The Call for An 'Islamic' Constitution

The core principle of governance in Islam is "Shura" (consultation and sharing of decision-making between the governor and the governed). The Divine instruction to the Prophet himself was, "*Wa Shawirhom fil amre fa ida azamta fa twakkal ala Allah*", which means: 'Consult them; and if, then, you decide, put your trust in God'. If this is the substance of governance we, as human beings, have to come up – and we did come up - with forms and structures suitable for our different conditions and circumstances. The structures are: Legislative; Executive; and Judiciary; and they all have their own substructures. But, the clerics attack the form or structures and forget about how to render the substance of governance. Doing so is like having a papaya without a pulp. Democracy has a form and substance: it can have many forms but the substance should essentially be the same.

There are those who call for an 'Islamic' Constitution to be written and adopted, instead of one imported from the West or inspired by Western ideas. The problem is that there has never been- a written *Islamic* Constitution anywhere, anytime in history. But, Muhammad Asad (1900-1992), highly respected Islamic

Scholar and convert grandson of an orthodox Rabbi, tried his very best to write one for Pakistan shortly after its formation - and he failed. There has never been a prototype; and there never was a Muslim government or polity that was uniquely Islamic – and there is none now. Let us remember, that immediately after the assassination of Othman (the Fourth Caliph) there followed only a series of Arab dynasties – a development that was anathema to Islam. And those were not theocratic at all. As a matter of fact, the Ka'ba itself was destroyed twice under the Umayyads – first under Yazid bin Muawiyah and then under AbdulMalek bin Marwan (Son of the Chief of Cabinet of Othman – the Fourth Caliph).

A veritable 'Islamic Rule' never really took root. Even Saudi Arabia, which people think is a theocratic Islamic State, does not have a uniquely Islamic form of government: it is a kingdom, and in Islam there are no kings, queens, princes, princesses or any other kind of nobility. Nor is Islamic Rule a theocracy in which authority lies with clerics who are not elected and are answerable to no one. Whilst Asad could not come up with a uniquely Islamic Constitution he wrote, *inter alia*, a book titled, “*The Principles of State and Government in Islam*” (ISBN983-9154-09-5) which I found enlightening. His *magnum opus* was, however, *The Message of the Qur'an*, which I highly recommend.

In view of all this, can anyone looking closely at the American Constitution, for instance, contend seriously that it is **un**-Islamic? It is the first written constitution in the world, and it was conceived, written and approved at a time when the country had not even heard about Islam. It can even be copied and adopted, *mutatis mutandis*, and it would just be as Islamic as the Somali Constitution of 1960. I do not see how this would be offensive to Islam. It is a good constitution, and the good things we see in the world are in accord with Islamic teachings. I realize, however, that modern life is so complicated that we do not always see eye to eye on what is good and what is not.

Conclusion

With the increasing attraction of secular modernity religion has been waning. People have become more materialistic, firmer believers in science which some wrongly think that it debunks religion, wearier of restrictions imposed by religion, and more clamorous of unfettered individual liberty. It is not surprising therefore that even non-religious restraints imposed by conservative traditions have been jettisoned. All this, is more apparent in the West than in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. But these latter are slowly, but surely, mimicking the West, with

Western educated people and diaspora communities returning to or visiting their countries of origin serving as vehicles for the diffusion of Western culture.

Somalia is not currently in a position to handle these disparate and confusing streams of ideas coming from secular and clerical sources. There is dire need for an effective government that controls the entire country, and an institutional framework capable of analyzing the field of policy options. I think there should be a national council of religious scholars in addition to the religious courts that deal and have been dealing in the past with family issues (marriage, divorce, child custody, estate, etc.) and the declaration of religious holidays. In the meantime, there should be some fora where religious and secular scholars could intermingle, meet, and enlighten each other. Finally, I need scatefully say that Muslims should be people of peace and progress in consonance with the teachings of Islam.

May the Almighty put us on the straight and narrow! Amiin!

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