

Moderate Muslims are the majority of Islam worldwide

It is a general tendency these days to regard Turkey as the best or the only example of a secular Islamic country. In technical political terms this might be true. But to think that this means that Turkey is the only country where a moderate Islam is the mainstream, or where a predominantly Muslim society searches for ways to enlarge 'democratic' values, is far from correct.

Pluralism, openness, individual freedoms, modernity, etc. These are the concepts most people have in mind when they consider the 'secularism' or 'democracy' of Turkey and when they almost perceive it as a miracle that you can find those in a society of which the about 94% of the population is Muslim. But other examples show that it is not a miracle at all.

Clouded by images of terrorism and Islamic extremism that can be seen on TV or read in the newspaper every day, it seems as if Islam inherently opposes democracy or pluralism. But those are in fact the marginal exponents of a form of Islam which is not endorsed by the largest group of Muslims in the world.

One example is the media coverage about the meeting of the Hizb ut-Tahrir in Indonesia. Gathering 80 000 people in Jakarta, the group talked about reinstalling the caliphate. The caliphate is a type of government envisioned by some that would represent the Muslim world in one Islamic state, that would be run by an elected Caliph as a successor to Muhammad's political authority and that would uphold Koranic law.

By many considered as a dangerous extremist group, this gathering of Hizb ut-Tahrir was looked at with suspicion by many.

But, even apart from the fact that the supposed links of the group with Islamic extremism are a matter of dispute, the gathering was not that impressive considering that it took place in Indonesia, a country with more than 220 million people.

Indonesia, which is trying to uphold its image as a moderate, modern and democratic also did not allow certain speakers to enter the country, like Imran Waheed, spokesman for the British branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir and Ismail Al Wahwah of the Australian division.

Indonesia is not an Islamic state, nor is Islam the state's official religion. On the other hand it is not secular either. Indonesia is a non secular republic with a state ideology (the Pancasila) that has as its first principle: "belief in the one and only God."

Yet the Indonesian Constitution states that "every person shall be free to choose and to practice the religion of his/her choice" and it "guarantees all persons the freedom of worship, each according to his/her own religion or belief". Officially only six religions are recognized. These are: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

The biggest surprise about Indonesia for most people in the west is that 88 % the population is Muslim, meaning that Indonesia is the country with the biggest amount – over 200 million – of Muslims.

Although there might be an increase in religiosity in Indonesia, there is not a direct trend towards more extremism. News like the meeting of the Hizb ut-Tahrir can be immediately countered by a report of eighteen religious leaders in Indonesia representing Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Islam and Protestantism that have issued a joint message calling for the nation to maintain pluralism.

Of course Indonesia, like any developing country, has loads of political and social problems, amongst which extremism has a place, but the mainstream way of living Islam is a very moderate one.

Indonesia's moderate Islam and pluralistic way of dealing with other religions thus shows that, if nothing else, at least statistically the biggest amount of Muslims in the world are moderate, as Indonesian Muslims outnumber the whole of the Arabian peninsula.

If you would add to that the number of more than 150 million Muslims in India, than the number stretches far beyond the total of the Arabic Islamic world.

The Republic of India is the largest democracy in the world and has since its independence strongly upheld freedom of religion. On Two Circles, a news site and web portal that gives a voice to the Indian Muslim community, Abusaleh Shariff, chief economist of NCAER, "It is important to highlight an important political reality: the Muslims in India are the most secular voters."

Of course the Muslims in India are a minority with their approximately 14% of the population, but it is noteworthy that the previous and widely praised president was a Muslim – although a symbolic post, Abdul Kalam has made great efforts to inspire Indian youth, received many honorary titles, and became known as 'the people's president'.

On top of it, although a minority in India, the number of Muslims closely numbers the number in neighboring Pakistan. So that means India houses a fairly huge amount of moderate Muslims.

In fact, Pakistan does so as well, it is only not perceived as such.

It has for example been amply reported of course that President Musharaf has had a great deal of trouble trying to control surges of extremism in his Islamic republic. But another piece of news giving quite a different view, did not get the same coverage as the fights between the army and Islamic students of the madrassa at the Red Mosque.

In the wake of the clash at the Lal Masjid, the movement "Yeh hum naheen" ("This is not us") made its theme song available for download on all major single providers on the net on the 16th of July. It had already topped the charts in Pakistan and India before.

The objective of movement according to their site is "to build on the essence of Islam as a faith that promotes tolerance, peace and harmony removing prejudices within the community and amongst non-Muslims around the world." The song, in line with this goal, was conceived by Waseem Mahmood whose children asked him to get a message to the world that young Pakistanis actually do not want to be associated with all that was happening around them in the name of Islam.

The song gathers the most famous singers of Pakistan singing "this is not us" in a true "We are the world" or "Band aid" style. The clip, showing both the singers and images of Muslims all over Pakistan singing along with the refrain, can be found on you tube and has got a lot of support.

Award winning director Waseem said the respons to the video was amazing. "I have been inundated with messages of support and congratulations from young Pakistanis around the world who have thanked me for standing up and giving voice to their sentiments. The response from the international music industry has been equally humbling - major stars, many of whom I have idolized myself have contacted me to say how much they loved the song and video and would like to collaborate with us on an English version... I guess that we must have done something right!"

But still a lot of such efforts shall have to be made before the western world sees that moderate Islam is in fact the bigger group. In an interview with Yunus News, the Malaysian sociology professor Dr. Siyed Farid Alatas, told that “Throughout Muslim history there have been extremist groups, but they never became dominant, because the majority always succeeded in marginalizing them. And we have many examples throughout history.”

The difference today, according to Alatas, is obvious reasons like globalisation and better communication making their voices more widely heard, but “More importantly”, he said, “one of the countries that has Wahabi ideology as the official ideology of the state (and I'm talking about Saudi Arabia of course), happens to be country which is also an oil rich state. So they were able to actually propagate their ideas through their wealth.”

Yet the Wahabi's in Saudi with their almost 25 million are only a small part of the total worldwide Muslim population. If their 'form of Islam' gets so much attention worldwide, it is also due to the media, according to Alatas. They find it more “interesting to cover bomb attacks or suicide bombings or even the mad rapings of an anti-Jewish Muslim cleric who makes an outrageous statement” instead of bringing news about the larger moderate Muslim world that tries to prevent or handle such things.

When media does not report the 'other side' it might give the idea that the Muslim world is not honestly trying in coming up with more plural, democratic and modern ideas both culturally and politically, but this is far from the truth. The west, and certainly Europe, gazes at Turkey because it is close by, but nobody sees the efforts that are made farther away.

Alatas is very certain that “It's not true that the Muslims are silent.” According to him many scholars for example are fighting extremism. Just like many organizations that are the opposite of Hizb ut-Tahrir are organizing all kinds of events to inform the public. “But these are not covered because they are not sensational events.” Alatas said. He himself is for example a Muslim who works with NGO's and inter-religious organizations in Singapore.

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Source: Yunus News

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