Islamic Concept of Social Justice in the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century continued to witness the decline of the Muslim world in its society, economy and politics as compared with the West. This phenomenon worsened with the Western interference and domination in the Muslim countries socially, economically and political affairs in particular. As a result, after the World War II many of Muslim countries like Egypt, Turkey and Pakistan slipped into a period of increasing chaos and anarchy. There emerged groups of Muslims who pressed for a solution to the existing dilemma facing society that was based on Islamic notion of social justice. Among Muslim scholars who discussed at length on social justice conception were Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala al Maududi and several others. According to these scholars, justice was central in the social theory of society where its achievement was dependent on the application of the Shariah law to human affairs. If the laws of a certain society had come to be disregarded, that society would be completely destroyed and demoralized.

Key words: Social Justice; Islamic Thought; Muslim countries; harmonious community

Introduction

The twentieth century continued to witness the decline of the Muslim world in its society, economy and politics as compared with the West. This phenomenon worsened with the appearance of corrupt political leaders in certain countries, who used country’s resources for their personal interest without considering the needs of the general population. As Khalidi (1994) wrote, ‘the West’s interferences in the politics and economy of the Muslim countries contributed towards the deterioration of the situation rather than solving the problems’. Realizing these situations, there appeared some Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century who were concerned about the problems and tried to find solutions from the Islamic perspective. Names like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949), Mawdudi (d 1979) and Sayyid Qutb (d 1966) were among those who saw that ‘something must be done’ to understand the causes of the decline so as to rectify the situation and restore Muslim countries to their proper place in the world. The continuing dire economic situation of the Muslim countries, the political corruptions coupled with the Western interference in the politics and economy of the countries contributed towards the deterioration of the situations rather than solving the problem.

In discussing social justice or justice in human society, the ancient philosophers attempt to highlight its importance in creating harmonious society. Plato for instance had a view that justice is a human virtue that makes a person self consistent and good while socially it is a social consciousness that makes a society internally harmonious and good. Aristotle’s concept of justice was on the other hand, rooted in equality and the just distribution of wealth within the community. This equality as Aristotle argued must be based on merit and the level of contribution one made in his socially life. Those making the greatest contribution to their society would have the greatest share of monetary rewards, honors and political office (Aristotle, 1946). Among Muslim scholars who discussed at length on social justice conception were Ibn Khaldun and Ibn al-Azraq. According to Ibn Khaldun, justice was central in the social theory of society where its achievement was dependent on the application of the Shariah law to human affairs. If the laws of a certain society had come to be disregarded, that society would be completely destroyed and demoralized (Khadduri, 1984: 188). For Ibn Azraq, the achievement of justice in human society would depend on rulers who took the office (Khadduri, 1984: 191).

This paper sheds some lights on the nature of social justice as enunciated by prominent scholars of the twentieth century like Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala al Maududi and several others. As social justice became the
central issue towards creating harmonious community, its implementation was inevitable. Historically the concept emerged in Western thought and political language in the wake of the industrial revolution. It was therefore seen as an expression of protest against the so-called capitalist exploitation of the masses. Following the revolutions that shook Europe in the mid-1800s, social justice became a rallying cry for progressive thinkers and political activists. By the early and mid-twentieth century, the concept of social justice later spread to Muslim countries whose economic resources, political affairs were under the Western domination. As a result there emerged some Muslim thinkers who proposed some alternative solutions in the form of writings including that of books and journal articles articulating social solutions in a practical and realistic manner, in true accord both with the spirit of Islam and the contemporary human situation.

Social Justice in Islam:

Social justice of the twentieth century Muslim world revolves around the question of how to establish an Islamic social system in accordance with the Islamic principles and throwing away Western influence that ever since deviate Muslims’ life from Islamic teachings. Most of books written during this era dealt extensively with the social, economic, cultural and educational conditions and policies especially during World War II and the post-war period. Modernist like al-Afghani and Abduh also gave some thought to the ideal standard of social justice. According to al-Afghani, only a society that possessed higher religion was capable of establishing and maintaining justice. With the spiritual and religious strength among members of the society, it was possible to observe and check on rulers and restrain them from oppression and injustice in human affairs (Khadduri, 1984: 198-199). Abduh, on the other hand, believed that justice could be achieved by the judicial system, which would need continual reform to meet changing conditions (Khadduri, 1984: 200). In a book al-‘Adalah written by Sayyid Qutb for instance, it was a reflection of both the current social and political problems facing Egyptian society. Qutb’s approach to social justice could be considered a response not only to the social and political problems facing his society, but also to the endless disputes among scholars in providing reliable criteria for measuring the level of justice in social order. Qutb chose to look for a solution in the roots of the Islamic doctrines when he states in Fi Zilal al-Quran:

‘With the passing of generation after generation after the miracle period (the prophet’s period), many libraries began to be filled with books on jurisprudence and law...many leaders started to speak about justice, many tongues started to talk about its application...there were various theories, means and plans suggesting its full application but the only true means of realizing justice in human conscience and life is from within that manhaj of Allah’ (Qutb, 2: 777).

According to Qutb, social justice exists once there is human liberation intellectually and emotionally from the instinct of servitude to and worship to any but Allah. There is a complete equality of all human beings, and social solidarity in the sense that one can gain complete access to Allah without any feeling of fear of life or fear of someone’s strength. Qutb thus terms this form of liberation as one of the ‘cornerstones for the establishing of social justice in Islam’ (Qutb, 2: 774).

The Doctrinal Concept:

Qutb held the opinion that one must first examine the Islamic theory of universe, life and humankind to gain a clear understanding of the nature of social justice in Islam. “For social justice is only a branch of that great science to which all Islamic studies must refer” (Qutb, 1952: 21). Therefore, humans, as part of God’s creation, whose lives constituted part of the lives of other creations in this universe, must co-operate with their fellow humans in their communities in the same way that they co-operated with other creatures of God. “When we perceive this comprehensiveness in the nature of the Islamic view of the universe, life and humankind, we perceive also the basic outlines of social justice in Islam” (Qutb, 1952: 28). Justice in Islam requires absolute justice (al-‘adl al-mutlaq), regardless of differences in colour, sex, race and belief. It united all humankind into one faith in God (the oneness of Allah). This means that solidarity, love, co-operation, and mutual understanding among human beings on the basis of faith in God what Islam sought to achieve through its teachings. Islamic justice in human social affairs also meant justice and equality in rights and punishment. Therefore, the individual, the group, the party, the nation are governed by one law with one goal, that the activity of the individual and the activity of the group may proceed freely and all can work together without conflict, directing their lives to God, the Creator of life. There is no favoring of one party at the expense of another, no favoring of the individual at the expense of the community, for each has rights and each has duties in accordance with the nature of justice and equality prescribed in Islam (Qutb, 1952: 27-28).

Social justice in Qutb’s view includes all aspects of human life, based on faith in God. This is, of course, in accordance with the nature of Islam as a religion of unity between worship and social relations, belief (‘aqidah) and behaviour (suluk), spiritual and material things, economic and spiritual values, this world and the afterlife, and earth and heaven. (Qutb, 1952: 28). In regard to the foundations of social justice, Qutb outlined three
The practical dimension: 

In regard to the practical dimension of social justice, its application and establishment will depend on the establishment of a strong governmental system of Islam. This is what Qutb and al-Mawdudi were struggling ever since and considered it necessary. Besides considering its establishment as an indication of Muslims’ faith in Allah, only through the strong and recognized system of government, would the application of shariah law be effective. This form of government was unique in the sense that it was neither derived from other political systems and ideologies known to the world today nor did it depend on them. Thus, if it had similarities found with other systems, this was more likely to be coincidental, since Islam had chosen its own characteristic path and concentrated its attention on all the problems of human nature. The principles of Islamic government, rested on justice on the part of the rulers, obedience on the part of the governed, and consultation (shura) between the ruler and the governed. Justice on the part of the ruler meant absolute impartiality in dealing with people under him, irrespective of their rank, colour, race, religious belief, or sex, so that all citizens could enjoy life in a just society (Qutb, 1952: 95). Obedience on the part of the governed was, however, conditional. It meant that the ruler was to be obeyed so long as he obeyed God and His messenger and manifested such obedience in practice. No obedience was due to a ruler who did not apply the shariah law in governing the whole Muslim community, even though he (the ruler) asserted that he was a devout Muslim. This is because the ruler in Islam is not obeyed for his own sake, but only because he submits to the authority of God (Qutb, 1952:96-97). At this point one may see how Qutb’s personal experience and his unhappiness with the existing conditions under the Egyptian government (Nasserite regime) reflected in his writing.

In his treatment of economic policy in Islam, Qutb wrote that it aimed to ensure the welfare of both individuals and the Muslim community. Here, he described in detailed elaboration on the concept of individual ownership of property. This was permitted in Islam with some restrictions on how the owners increased and used their property. In this context Qutb’s point was that the individual acted for the property. Therefore, the property in the widest sense was a right which could belong only to the community, which in turn received it as a trust from Allah, who was the only true owner of everything (Qutb, 1952: 107). The lawful work of any kind was the only permissible method of acquiring property whilst usury, robbery, monopoly, theft and all other the crimes that underlie contemporary means of exploitation were prohibited. In this sense, obligation of zakat was the best example to solve social problems and finally bring social justice to human society: ‘such assistance from the zakat is the ultimate social benefit, and constitutes a guarantee for the man who is without resources...the needy must be helped in order to avoid destitution, in order to relieve him of the weight of necessity and the pressure of need, and then to set him free for a nobler form of life (Qutb, 1952:137). Furthermore, he argued that such act of the obligatory claim of property of the wealthy in favour of the poor can easily be implemented by a government that will have power and capability to exact by law (Qutb, 73-74).

Thus, social justice enunciated by Qutb contains the theoretical principles and foundations of Qub’s Islamic thought before he joined the Ikhwân in 1952. The significance of the book lies in the fact that it was the first Islamic work written by Qutb to propose a third option to what seemed an inevitable choice between capitalism and communism. In his view, the justice offered by Islam in all aspects of human life was superior to that offered by capitalism and communism, because it combined spiritual values and human social relations. The
spiritual values, derived from a strong belief in God coupled with the enforcement of sharī'ah laws, were an effective means of realizing social justice in human society. It is not surprising, therefore, to see many Qur'ānic verses cited to support his search for the answer to the current situation in Egypt. In this context, Abu Rabī‘ is right when he considers al-'Adalah “a radical departure from Qutb’s early work in literary, Qur’ānic and social criticism. More important at this stage is that Qutb emerges as a social critic with a radical Islamic agenda” (Abu Rabī‘, 1996:120).

Conclusion:

Though Qutb’s and al Mawdudi’s idea seems to be theoretical in nature, their ideas provide an overall insight on how Muslim should start with in their journey searching for their own fundamental resources to solve their existing problem facing their country. Neither communism nor capitalism can provide prescription for their own disease. Between 1948 and 1952, both Qutb and al-Mawdudi’s Islamic thought was very much apparent in their books; al-'Adalah, Ma'rakat, Tafheem al-Quran whose contents focused on Islamic solutions and became a radical departure.

The emergence of the social justice theme in Qutb’s and al-Mawdudi’s thought can only be understood within the context of the prevailing conditions in Egypt and Pakistan. Qutb believed that Islam is a social and political force in the Muslim world. While al Mawdudi believed that through an Islamic state then social justice could be established without any objection since all Muslims are united under one umbrella ‘the oneness of Allah’. Qutb’s agitation for Islamic social and political reforms in this period reflected his attempt to present Islam as a system superior to any other known in human history. His interest in the justice of Islam as a means of solving the current problems developed only after his realization that the available ideologies, capitalism and communism in particular, could not successfully provide an effective means of establishing social justice in human society. These chronological stages of Qutb’s intellectual development and his continuous efforts in finding solutions to the current problems enabled him to discover “what really needed to be done” to his own society.

Thus, concept of Islamic social justice in the twentieth century is all embracing in the sense that it includes justice in all aspects of human life, spiritual and material, and is not merely limited to economic justice. Human beings have to be just towards themselves, their families and their communities. This must begin with the purification of human hearts from the worship of anything but God alone. Only from such a group of people, whose beliefs are completely free of servitude to anyone but God, can a new community whose social, political and economic affairs based on the sharī'ah of God be established. For justice, co-operation and integration between human beings constitute part of the existing justice and unity in the rest of God’s creations in this universe. An analysis of Qutb’s and al-Mawdudi’s treatment of social and political issues and their effort to call Muslims back to the manhaj of God revealed that Qutb in many ways was influenced by al-Mawdudi and both was of the conviction that an Islamic community could be established again if people would fulfill exactly the demands of the Qur’ān. The only thing to do was to call people to refresh their mind and to live their lives in accordance with the Qur’ānic teachings.

References


