

Viewpoint

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Setting the record straight on the caliphate

Early Islamic history carries the seeds for contemporary reforms

By AHMA AFSARUDDIN

Many Muslims watch in horror these days as some of the terms they associate most positively with their religion are appropriated by extremists and then fed back to Western media with a negative spin. “Jihad” and “Shariah” were the first victims. Now “caliphate” has met the same fate.

“Jihad” has traditionally referred to the effort made by pious Muslims to better themselves and the world around them through spiritual, mental, educational and physical -- including military -- means. But extremists today use the term only in the military sense, against anyone they arbitrarily name as the enemy, including Muslims they disagree with. Similarly, “Shariah,” an Arabic word meaning “the Way,” refers to broad moral and legal principles from which specific laws may be created through human interpretation.

Mainstream Muslims regard the Shariah as a source of mercy and justice. A considerable number among them insist that outside of matters of worship, much of it is subject to different interpretations in different times and circumstances. The Shariah is not simply a collection of harsh punishments, such as stoning for adultery and amputation of hands for theft, nor does it necessarily dictate inferior social status for women and religious minorities. Yet thanks to the extremists, jihad and Shariah have entered the Western media primarily as terms that point to violent, merciless and unchanging Islamic societies.

Now militants have tainted another cherished concept, the caliphate, something they hope to recreate in order to impose their bloody world order. Understandably, this has caused concern in many circles. President Bush recently raised the “specter” of a revived caliphate, causing goose bumps to form on the collective national epidermis. Others have warned of the dire consequences of a universal community of Muslims united under a single leader, their caliph. This would inevitably lead to totalitarian rule and a holy war against the West, an event desired by mainstream Muslims, or so we are told.

For those who know anything about early Islamic history, these characterizations are alarmist and historically inaccurate. The caliphate for which most Muslims have a high regard is specifically that of the Rightly Guided caliphs. This is the name given to the first four men who ruled the community between 632-661, after the death of the prophet Muhammad. As recorded in early texts, the time of the Rightly Guided caliphs represents certain cherished ideals.

For instance, these men who succeeded one another were not related by blood and came to power through some process of consultation. They admitted their accountability publicly, as did Abu Bakr, the first caliph, who asked the people to correct him if he should fall into error. They became fabled for their tolerance toward religious minorities and respect for the rights of women. Thus Umar, the second caliph, refused to pray in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem when invited to do so by the patriarch there because he was afraid that the site might later be wrongfully claimed by Muslims as a mosque.

According to the ninth-century historian Tabari, Umar promised the Christians of Jerusalem that their churches, crosses, lives and possessions would be protected. Umar also appointed a woman to the influential post of market inspector for the city of Medina and entrusted his copy of the Quran, which was the basis for the final version, to a daughter and not to a son.

Many mainstream Muslims I know point to examples such as these when they wax poetic about the Rightly Guided caliphs.

But a very different Umar crops up later in history as a kind of intolerant twin to the above. In contrast to the caliph described by Tabari, this Umar forbade Christians from repairing their churches and imposed humiliating restrictions on the practice of their faith.

Interestingly, Umar's double does not make his appearance in any historical source before roughly the 11th century. The second, later Umar was clearly invented in more sectarian, troubled times. Quest for worldly power and social privilege sometimes trumped fair treatment and justice and became reflected in law. This has been the unhappy experience of most societies of the world in relation to women and minorities. In our own times, when a Christian West is perceived by many to be on a collision course with the world of Islam, the alternative Umar's harsh decrees have been marshaled to legitimize bigotry practiced by and against Muslims.

We forget how much of modern Western political and legal reform was predicated on a return to the past for a selective retrieval of ideals. It was an appeal to an idealized ancient Roman republic that brought about the establishment of representative government in the West after centuries of despotism that had been justified by some on religious grounds. More recently, it was the biblical insistence on the dignity of human beings that focused attention on human rights in the West.

Many of the values and practices associated with the earliest Islamic caliphate can translate into democratic governance, equal rights for women and religious minorities and creation of civil societies today. They set powerful historical and legitimizing precedents for genuine reform and revival in contemporary Islamic societies. Rather than causing goose bumps, a responsible and critical engagement with the past, including the caliphate, on the part of reform-minded, forward-looking Muslims should be cause for optimism.

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