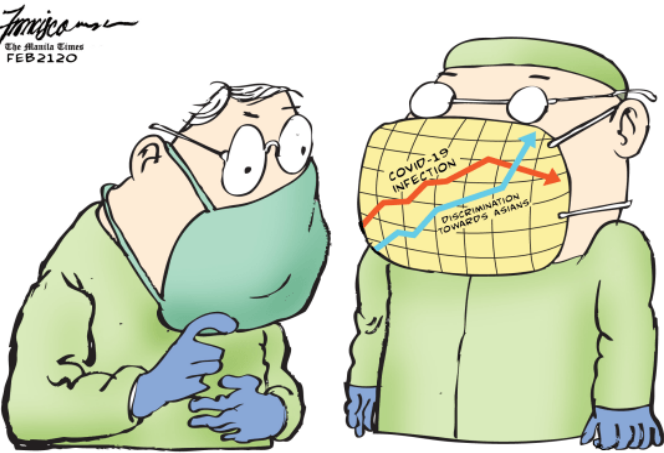


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NO HOLDS BARRED



Urban India is witnessing one of the worst challenges as far as poverty is concerned. It is not a hidden fact that humongous inequality exists in the cities, which has further accentuated in the last three decades and particularly since 2014

Malaysian Summit Portends Well For Ummah

KHURRAM WANI



OIC has so far failed to unify Ummah or even rise to the level where it could be counted as a significant voice among the commity of nations. With a good beginning made at Kuala Lumpur, Turkey, Iran and Malaysia need to move forward and give their alliance a formal shape.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad recently stated that the Muslim world was in “state of crisis”. He was right in more ways than one.

From military and political upheavals of African Muslim countries like Libya and Sudan to devastating wars in Iraq, Yemen and Syria in the wider Arab world to relentless strife in places like Afghanistan Muslim world is in ferment. Add to this suppression of political will in Kashmir to genocide of Rohingya in Asia, Muslim world is far away from better times but rather plunging deeper in the chaos.

African countries are reeling under massive poverty despite having abundance of resources which have been left to be exploited by European countries like France. And more misery is sure to come if strategies are not changed.

Recent summit meet in Malaysia of major Muslim powers was an outcome of this growing frustration amongst those Muslim leaders who retain semblance of freedom and have intellectual depth to offer solutions. They are the ones among long list of 54 countries which are desperately seeking a life of dignity and peace for their people and wider Ummah. This meet was an attempt to create a parallel platform to now virtually defunct OIC.

These progressive and militarily more powerful Muslim countries under visionary leadership could sense the urgency of coming together and put their heads together for a new vision and roadmap. Pakistan and Turkey were seen as the key players behind the move with support of Iran, Qatar and host country Malaysia. Iran is considered diplomatically, strategically and militarily powerful amongst Muslim world while Qatar is a very resource rich country. Most of the Arab nations saw this summit as a challenge to their monopoly over Muslim affairs thus far. These petro-rich Arab states not only refused to participate but forced some other members, like Pakistan to back-out from the summit.

Possible Challenges

Syria is one of contentious issue that has the potential to create hurdle in further consolidation of this new Muslim alliance. Battle for Idlib in particular has brought Turkey and Syria face to face militarily. While Syrian military is backed by Russia and Iran, rebels holed up in Idlib, their last stronghold, have backing of Turkey, the only Muslim NATO member besides the wider West. Here lies the catch.

Since West has succeeded in portraying Syrian

war as sectarian Turks have wittingly or unwittingly fallen in the trap. By siding with the rebels, who happen to be mostly Sunni’s, President Erdogan wants to be seen as champion of Sunni causes worldwide even though he has failed to extend similar military or even diplomatic support to Sunni Palestinians in Gaza who mainly rely on support from Shia Iran. Interestingly Turkey is among the handful of Muslim countries maintaining cordial diplomatic relationship with Israel. It is imperative on both Turkey and Iran to rise above and beyond narrow diplomatic gains for a much larger cause.

Today if Russia has regained its respect in the world the credit would go majorly to its pro-active role in Syria other than annexation of Crimea. And Russia could not do what it achieved in Syria without the Iranian help on ground. So if Turkey and Iran collaborates it will not only set an example for the rest of the Muslim world but can give Tehran and Ankara bargaining power even with Russia. As Russian economy is nowhere close to Americas Moscow cannot afford getting bogged down in a long term conflict.

Last week Trump administration gave a statement hinting that the Iranian government should be thankful to Pakistani administration, especially to Imran Khan for timely intervention in support of Iran after Qassim Soleimni’s assassination. Pakistan and Turkey share a very special relationship. They have even announced their intentions of dual citizenship which can take care of the crucial foreign remittances Pakistan receives from Persian Gulf countries. So Iran needs not to be apprehensive and suspicious of its brother countries.

Another issue which is worrisome for Iran is Pakistan’s support to Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan should also explain to Iran about how it plans to support Taliban while keeping Iran’s security and well being in consideration.

All these countries are acting in the name of religion so they should keep the idea of sacrifice of small interest in mind for greater unity as it is the essence of Islam.

Need for a new OIC

OIC has so far failed to unify Ummah or even rise to the level where it could be counted as a significant voice among the commity of nations. The only politics from the current leadership of OIC was divisive and of hate, creating different groups within the Muslim world which are perpetually at war with each other. The nucleus of radical politics happens to be the host

country of OIC which enjoys extraordinary support from Western world. And ironically the same ideology is demonized for all the right reasons in the Western media so as to justify and make a pretext for their invasions of other resource rich Muslim countries.

Keeping the Muslim world divided is economically good for West and politically suites the Israeli state which has a very strong lobby in America. Certain Arab countries were present in the room to show support to the ‘Deal of the Century’ a new Israel-Palestine plan drafted by Trump’s Jewish son-in-law announced recently. The new plan is aimed at securing Israeli interests both legal and illegal and is diametrically opposed to pre-1967 position demanded by Palestine which is backed by various UN resolutions. Closeness of Saudi government with Mr Trump and Israel has left the whole Muslim Ummah shocked. This numbness from Arab masses over core issues shows lack of awareness, indignity and intellectual bankruptcy of the Arab world. Soon after the announcement of Trump plan one more shocker came in from Saudi government. It has disallowed OIC meet called by Pakistan over Kashmir issue. Similar actions in the past like awarding of highest civilian award to President Trump and Prime Minister Modi by Saudi, UAE and Bahrain have send wrong signals to the Islamic world. These sort of events leave deep psychological impact and suspicion in the masses and psychologically breaks their morale.

Diplomacy is a scale for the measurement of strength of brain where OIC members individually and collectively have been a big failure till now. Strong and effective diplomacy not only includes knowing about your own strength and weaknesses but the level of knowledge and awareness one has about the political dynamics of the whole world. Arabs could have used vast economic resources as a live leverage while negotiating with their adversaries. Intelligent diplomacy and unity could have helped OIC members to carve a space for themselves in today’s multi polar world. But alas Arab countries led by Gulf Sheikhdoms consumed these resources in fuelling further strife in the Ummah by launching endless conflicts based on sectarian and narrow political goals.

With a good beginning made at Kuala Lumpur, Turkey, Iran and Malaysia need to move forward and give their alliance a formal shape. With Imran Khan of Pakistan now falling in line though belatedly after realising the blunder he made at the behest of Saudi’s, it is right time to bid OIC a goodbye and launch OIC in its new avatar for the collective good of Ummah.

Walls Cannot Hide It!

TIKENDER SINGH PANWAR



Carolisa Monterio, a Bollywood singer, aptly pointed out that after being Chief Minister of Gujarat for 12 years and Prime Minister of India for six years, Narendra Modi still needs a wall to hide his ‘Gujarat Model’ from US President Donald Trump. Perhaps, Modi can hide the ‘model’ from Trump on his visit to India, but the spread of abysmal poverty and inequity in the country, and in Gujarat, cannot be hidden by building walls or by hiding data.

It is interesting to note that Modi and Trump enjoy deep roots of commonality in their ideas of governance and politics. Both are anti-minority, and use jingoism to justify their hatred towards working people, especially the poor. Trump is known for his stance against immigrants, and for building a wall along the Mexico border. Similarly, Modi is targeting the marginalised, the minorities and the poor in India to consolidate his politics. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the proposal for a National Register of Citizens (NRC) point toward the anti-minority and anti-poor stance of the Modi government.

Back to the wall now built to wall off an Ahmedabad ‘basti’ where 700 families live: It has come to light that invariably, all of the basti’s residents are engaged in informal labour and have been demanding civic amenities from the municipal authorities. Instead of recognising that swathes of poor settlements are prevalent across the country and in Gujarat, Modi wants to hide them as the much-touted model of ‘vibrant’ Gujarat would be shattered if the world comes to know the state of affairs in his home state -- forget ‘vikas’, even open defecation continues to prevail in that state.

Urban India is witnessing one of the worst challenges as far as poverty is concerned. It is not a hidden fact that humongous inequality exists in the cities, which has further accentuated in the last three decades and particularly since 2014. An Oxfam report has starkly pointed out that 63 individuals own assets worth more than the total budget of the Government of India. A comparison of rural and urban inequality is revealing: the gap between the top 10% and bottom 10% of asset holders in rural India is 500 times; in urban India, that gap is about 50,000 times.

Modi’s rule and the ‘Gujarat Model’ have widened the gap. Since Modi took power, the gover-

nance model and city development model in the country saw a dramatic alteration from the past. This is not to say that Modi’s predecessors were pro-poor and designed policies to address urban poverty but only to point out that Modi’s rule has brought about a transformation in city development model. In simple terms, it meant that a change was effectively brought out to ensure that city governance models and development models are not restricted to just managing the affairs of the city -- for example, providing civic amenities like water, sanitation, housing, etc. -- but to effectively run the city as an ‘entrepreneur’. And for that, city

governance structures had to take on the onerous task of attracting investments.

This transformation, typical of the ‘Gujarat Model’, was first announced in the form of 100 smart cities, wherein cities were asked to be competitive and ensure that investments take place for city development. This was a clear departure from the past. To attract investments, certain fundamental changes were asked to be brought about in the development trajectory. Land monetisation was one such change. In more than 85% of the smart city proposals, the cities have opted for redevelopment projects. The second form of investment was to be sought in

pan-city development, which had more to do with the Internet of Things.

The redevelopment model of cities leads to large-scale eviction of the poor and marginalised groups. It is estimated that a slum dweller is evicted from Indian cities every three minutes. In some large cities, the slum populations comprise nearly 50% of the population and in many cases, the slums occupy what is called ‘prime land’.

Another form of assault on the urban poor is through the virtual privatisation of housing in the cities. More than 25% of public housing is the universally accepted model of inclusive housing. In India, public housing has fallen from 6% to 3%. This has led to massive sprouting of urban slums. Since the urban poor, amongst whom a large population comprise migrant workers, are unable to bear the cost of private housing in the cities, they are forced to live in slums. The mounting cost of utilities, education, health and even water add to the massive surplus that capital extracts from people in the cities.

The 100 Smart Cities model, by which the cities were supposed to become beacons of urbanisation in India, is already fading. However, what the model has created and will leave behind is more urban sprawl, and more urban poor, now worse off than before.

It is this failure of the Modi government which came in boasting of creating sparkling cities, applauding the massive use of technology to provide urban solutions, that the wall in Ahmedabad brings into view.

The data reveals that neither Indian cities have become open-defecation free, nor have they been able to attract investments for their development. And instead of accepting the failure of its model, the Modi government has decided to hide it -- from Indians, by not releasing the data on urban poverty; and from outsiders like Trump, by building walls. But these walls are not enough to hide the reality.

Poverty has struck deep roots into our society over generations. We can dream of throwing it off our backs, but the reality is that without bringing in a qualitative change in the development paradigm, our vulnerability will only continue to accentuate.

(The writer is a former deputy mayor of Shimla)