ABSTRACT

[RIAZ Hassan] embarked on his study expecting that in an Islamic state, where the majority is Muslim, people would put much trust in their religious scholars and prayer leaders. After all, Islamic militants and their Western opponents often compete in their insistence that an Islamic state is the natural expression of Islam.

Hence his message for militants: "An Islamic state may not be in the best interests of Islamic institutions and religious elites." And if scholars and prayer leaders do lose public trust and support, their isolation may send them down paths not "conducive to the profession and promotion of the universality of Islam". More bluntly, Hassan offers as a warning the rise of the Taliban and the possible role of the religious schools in Pakistan.

In the Muslim world, Hassan says, there is "a religious renaissance". His survey found high levels of devotion to Islamic faith. This confirmed Hassan's personal impression as a widely travelled Muslim, originally from Pakistan. "If you just look at the dress code," he says, "Muslims are much more conscious of Islamic dress now than they were 30 years ago." In the apprehensive Western mind, such an effusion of faith is equated with militancy and support for an Islamic state. Not so, Hassan's survey suggests. "Contrary to the general belief," he says, "increasing religiosity in Muslim countries is associated with political liberalisation and diminishing support for militant Islamic groups."

FULL TEXT

RIAZ Hassan, an Adelaide academic, has a message for militant Muslims who thirst for an Islamic state: "You can have power or trust, but not both." Rhetoric about Islam is plentiful but behind Hassan's suggestion is something rare: empirical evidence.

He believes his international survey – of Muslims, by Muslims and chiefly for Muslims – is the first of its kind. He has just published a book – Faithlines: Muslim concepts of Islam and society (Oxford University Press) – reporting his study of attitudes to religion and politics in four quite different Muslim majority countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt and Kazakhstan.

His survey was administered to 4400 professionals, religious activists and workers by research centres in each country. Suspicion was the greatest difficulty. In Egypt the survey had to be cut short in 1998 after military intelligence took an interest.

"One lesson which I learned while carrying out the study," Hassan says, "is that in the late 20th century the Muslim mind is very susceptible to conspiracy theories which invariably involve some vision of a Western villain trying to undermine the Islamic world."

Hassan, a professor of sociology at Flinders University, went in armed with a research grant. Empirical research has a habit of suggesting sometimes disconcerting conclusions. Here are some of Hassan's.
An Islamic state may not be good for Islam.

Hassan embarked on his study expecting that in an Islamic state, where the majority is Muslim, people would put much trust in their religious scholars and prayer leaders. After all, Islamic militants and their Western opponents often compete in their insistence that an Islamic state is the natural expression of Islam.

To his surprise he found that in Pakistan, the closest in his survey to an Islamic state, people had little trust in religious leaders. Yet in Indonesia, where the constitution ordains that faith be kept separate from the state, the religious enjoyed the highest trust of any institution.

Why? Hassan found a "feedback loop" between trust in politics and in religion.

"When an Islamic state -- in which religion and politics are integrated -- lacks trust and political legitimacy in the public mind, it may in fact cause an erosion of trust in Islamic institutions," Hassan says. And in Muslim societies today, a weak state and lack of popular trust in politics are the norm.

Yet the resulting corruption, poverty and injustice offer religion an opportunity. Religion can seem to have answers where the state has none -- but to do this, creed must be independent of politics.

Hence his message for militants: "An Islamic state may not be in the best interests of Islamic institutions and religious elites." And if scholars and prayer leaders do lose public trust and support, their isolation may send them down paths not "conducive to the profession and promotion of the universality of Islam". More bluntly, Hassan offers as a warning the rise of the Taliban and the possible role of the religious schools in Pakistan.

In Hassan's opinion, it is probably better to keep "faithlines" separate from "the faultlines of the political terrain".

The dramatic assertion of Muslim piety and identity is happening at the same time as support for militant Islam is declining.

In the Muslim world, Hassan says, there is "a religious renaissance". His survey found high levels of devotion to Islamic faith. This confirmed Hassan's personal impression as a widely travelled Muslim, originally from Pakistan. "If you just look at the dress code," he says, "Muslims are much more conscious of Islamic dress now than they were 30 years ago." In the apprehensive Western mind, such an effusion of faith is equated with militancy and support for an Islamic state. Not so, Hassan's survey suggests. "Contrary to the general belief," he says, "increasing religiosity in Muslim countries is associated with political liberalisation and diminishing support for militant Islamic groups."

Paradoxically or not, Muslims deeply attached to traditional images of piety also supported liberal principles such as human rights. Most of those answering Hassan's survey approved of moderate political leaders seeking "democratic and tolerant societies". And by a large majority, they were not members of radical Islamic organisations.

But precisely this lack of public support seems to be having a perverse effect on the militants, making them still more radical and secretive. "The ruthlessness of their violence reflects their desire to gain public attention and is symptomatic of their desperation," Hassan says.
"The old form of militancy aimed at establishing the legitimacy of political goals; the new form is guided by religious fanaticism, destruction and revenge. The old type of militancy had identified enemies. The new enemies are ephemeral global conspiracies."

Sounds familiar, but what can be done about it?

"I think one way actually to ensure a proper role of Islam in society is to make it become part of the mainstream," Hassan says.

As an example, he cites the recent presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid in Indonesia; here was a Muslim figure of tremendous influence in the thick of electoral politics.

Hassan offers another, perhaps more surprising example of Islam moving into the mainstream and away from militancy: Iran, whose 1979 revolution created a powerful symbol of Islam as one religion, one state.

An Islamic state itself creates strong forces for secularisation.

Once the Shi’a religious elites came to power, Hassan says, they made a surprising discovery. They had expected to be able to impose their religious program. Yet the very nature of that program — and the diversity of people they had to deal with as political rulers — generated resistance.

"They had to start to make concessions because at the same time they were holding elections," he says.

He makes much of a 1989 constitutional amendment "empowering the government to set aside Shari’a [Islamic legal] principles, including the fundamental pillars of the faith such as prayers and fasting, if it is in the general interest of the Muslim nation".

Hassan: "They could get away with that only because it was an Islamic state." It may be a symbolic change of disputed significance but Hassan's point is that had one of the Muslim world's post-colonial leaders of the secular-nationalist variety attempted such an initiative, there would have been much greater opposition.

Hassan: "So you could actually end up with an Islamic state which is much more secular, almost fascist, than for example would be the case in Indonesia."

Reform still encounters stiff resistance in Iran but Hassan points to notable, sometimes inadvertent changes — Islamic dress made university possible for many women from conservative homes, for example, and women have been among the successful candidates in the vigorous electoral politics of the republic.

Hassan hopes the reformist mood in the country will allow him to include Iran — he is there now on a visit — in the second stage of his survey. Already, however, he thinks Iran compares well with a country such as Algeria, where military intervention in 1992 almost certainly thwarted an Islamic state-in-waiting. More than 100,000 people have died in the ensuing violence.

Had the military stayed their hand, Hassan suspects that "Algeria would have started a process of self-secularisation by now. In another 5 or 10 years Iran will be a normal country in the community of nations, but I think Algeria has really become much more problematic."
Muslim attitudes to religion and politics

I know Allah really exists and I have no doubts about it

Indonesia: 97 per cent agreed; Pakistan: 97; Egypt: 97; Kazakhstan: 31 (a special case because of communism).

I pray at least five times a day

Indonesia: 96 per cent; Egypt: 90; Pakistan: 57.

Trust in religious scholars

Indonesia: 96 per cent; Egypt: 90; Pakistan: 48.

Trust in prayer leaders

Indonesia: 94 per cent; Egypt: 83; Pakistan: 44.

Trust in parliament

Indonesia: 53 per cent; Egypt: 34; Pakistan: 22.

Trust in political parties

Indonesia: 35 per cent; Egypt: 28; Pakistan: 12.

Source: Faithlines – Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society by Riaz Hassan, Oxford University Press

Illustration
Caption: Surprise: Jakarta's Grand Istiqlal Mosque. The Indonesian constitution separates faith from the state and religious leaders enjoy the highest trust of any institution; Photo: PhotoTable

DETAILS

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