Historical Analysis of the Early Muslim Nationhood: Lessons for Contemporary Muslim Communities

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Abstract

Modern Muslim communities have differing experiences in terms of compatibility or otherwise of the norms and values governing the political and social conducts of the places they live in. Some norms are bitterly intolerant, some are fair, others are tolerant and opening up, while some are Islamic, hence the communities are home to Muslims. This paper aims at perusing through the phases of the early Muslim generation's quest for sovereign nationhood to figure out models for contemporary Muslim communities, with their different experiences. The paper draws a conclusion that the early Muslim community, under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad PBUH underwent four different phases, each characterized by certain experiences relevant enough to stand as a model for contemporary Muslim communities with similar contexts, to amicably cope with their socio-political contexts and peacefully co-exist with nations of other faiths and governments of other policies, to achieve common developmental interests, without letting down neither their faith nor the countries they live in. The work is fundamentally literary-based and analytical method is followed therein.

Key words: Early Muslim Nationhood, Lessons, Contemporary Muslim communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The life of Prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H., from all its aspects, stands as an exemplary pattern for the believers to emulate, s manifested in Quran 33:21:

چ ئو ئۇ ئۇ ئۆ ئۆ ئۈ ئۈ ئې ئې ئې ئى ئى ئى ی ی ی چ

"Ye have, indeed, in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is In Allah and the final Day, and who engages much In the Praise of Allah",

However, the rudimental and diverse changes being witnessed in the modern world political formats make it incumbent upon contemporary Muslim communities to refer to the political model set by the Prophet, to derive lessons for their respective situations.

The socio-political aspect of the Prophet's life is full of incidences and decisions relevant enough to solve whatever political and social challenges a Muslim community may face and amicably adapt whatever experience it may find itself in.

Throughout the Prophetic socio-political course, the early Muslim community passed through four difference experiences; ranging from an oppressed minority, an asylum seeker in a society of different faith, a co-citizen with people of other faiths, to a majority and power holder.

However, each of the aforementioned experiences relevantly stands as a tool for shaping different situations of Muslim communities under today's political systems.

Undoubtedly, careful study and proper adoption of any of these experiences by a contemporary Muslim community with similar situation will promote tolerance and productive inter-citizenship of Muslims and people of other faiths.

This paper therefore, aims at analyzing these four experiences and their relevance in dealing with contemporary citizenship problems of different Muslim communities.

2. Conceptualizing Nationhood of Islam

One of the distinctive features of Islam is its comprehensive nature, by which it covers the whole aspects of human life from its various dimensions, politics and society

included[i], unlike secularism and some ideologies, religions and systems; scope of Islam is much wider, since it regulates man's relationship not only with God and his own conscience, which is the scope of most religions, but with the state at large[ii].

As a testimony to this, al-Baqarah, the second and longest chapter in the Holy Quran embodies hundreds of injunctions relating to diverse aspects of life. The following verses are an example:

چگ گ ں ں ڻ ڻ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ہ ہ ہ ہ چ

"O mankind! Worship your Lord (Allah), who created you and those who were before you so that you may become pious", 2:21

چۇ ۇ ۋ ۋ ۋ ۋ ۅ ۅ ۉ ۉ ې ې ې ې د ئا ئا ئه ئه ئو چ

"It is prescribed for you, when death approaches any of you, if He leaves wealth, that He make a bequest to parents and next of kin, according to reasonable manners…", 2:180

چټ ټ ټ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ ٹ چ

"O You who believe! Observing As-Sawm (the fasting) is prescribed for You…", 2:183

and,

چۇ ې ې ې ې پپ چ

"Jihad is ordained for You, though You dislike it …" 2:216

Each of these verses deals with a different issue; while verse 21 above establishes the Lordship of Allah the Exalted and His exclusive worthiness of being worshipped, which is a mere convictional affair, verse 180 is concerned with Will, a solely personal legal affair.

Also, as verse 183 relates to Fasting, which is a mere rite, 216 obligates Jihad, an international and security/defence issue. Likewise, many miscellaneous topics are contained in the Chapter, ranging from family, commerce to politics.

As early as the Dawn of Islam, a simple communal identity of a Muslim nation emerged in Mecca, in form of a people with a new and distinguished order fundamentally different from the traditional one and shedding most of the ancestral norms.

Also, a simple setup of a state came into being with the Prophet PBUH as the Head, vested with the whole powers and characteristics of a leader, and the early Muslims as its citizens and the Quran and Sunnah as the guideline principles organizing the conduct and direction of the community.

Afterwards, the ten-year old Muslim community evolved into what became Medinan Community with the migration of Meccan Muslim community thereto, marking the beginning of another distinctive epoch.

In this era, features of a supreme constitutional nation became clearer, as verses directly dealing with statehood and governance started to be revealed in the holy Quran and practically interpreted by the Prophet PBUH, law and order maintained, governors, judges, imams, Zakat collectors and ambassadors sent to different parts of the expanding Muslim community, principles of justice laid, military system and activities started to take place and principles governing the conduct of different aspects of social life unveiled. All these have taken place abreast the other half of Islam, in form of religious injunctions pertaining creed, rites, morality etc., making nationhood and statecraft an integral part of Islam.

3. Fragmenting the Early Muslim Nationhood:

3.1 The Relevance:

Looking into the ups-and-downs of the first Muslim generation gives the researcher an insight that the first Muslim generation went through four experiences of living with four categories of people, and therefore, each category was dealt with in a totally different manner, as rationally, an entirely equal treatment should not be given to different types of people with different attitudes.

Therefore, the variation in the manner of treating different peoples by the early Muslim nation did not stem from a methodological inconsistency; rather, it depended on the different attitudes of the peoples they dealt with.[iii]

However, just as in some times, Muslims lived amid people who simply accepted and treated them as partners, noble guests and friends, they also, lived with others who regarded them as enemies and went as far as to attack them or expel them out their native soil. Therefore, it's relevant that each experience was treated differently.

This variation in the treatment of different categories of the people has been manifested by the Holy Quran in places like 8:61:

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"But if they incline to peace, You also incline to it, and (put your) trust In Allâh. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Knower"

and 60: 8-9:

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گ گ گ گ ں ڻ ڻ ڈ ڈ ۀ ۀ ہ چ

"Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of Religion and did not drive you out of your homes. Verily, Allah loves those who deal with equity. It is only as regards those who fought against you on account of religion, and have driven you out of your homes, and helped to drive you out, that Allah forbids you to befriend them. And whosoever will befriend them, then such are the wrong-doers".

The verses magnify that people are different and that they should be treated differently, according to their different attitudes.

Interestingly, as it will be discussed at a later junction in the paper, the manner in which each experience was handled by the early Muslims scored Islam valuable points in ways like facilitating its spread, simplifying its practice, tying cordial relationships with other nations and making it more reverent.

Interestingly, each experience of the early Muslim community is, in modern times, being underwent by a certain Muslim community or, at least, Muslim individual, making it a suitable lesson to be learnt from, in the most possible and relevant manner.

Therefore, looking into the early Muslims lifetime via those different experiences sounds relevant.

However, the following are the phases passed through by the early Muslims in quest of giving birth to a sovereign nationhood:

3.2 The Four Phases

3.2.1 The Early Mecca Phase

Mecca is the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, his early followers, and Islam at large. The native Meccan community was a mixture of polytheism and paganism by religion, whereby idol-worshiping was the mainstream form of religious manifestation, to the extent that each clan had a special idol and a way of worshipping it.[iv]

In a community of ardent adherence to paganism like Mecca, emerged the call to Islam, a religion basically calling to defying any deity other than Allah, by a native son of the land It seemed much unpleasant to the Meccan community and therefore strongly rejected it.

However, in Mecca, Muslims, although increasing in number, lived as a minority, seen and treated as aliens and enemies of the ancestral heritage and the general norms, thereby posing threat to the dear religious and social setup of the land.

As a result, different ways were decisively followed in showing disagreement with the new religion; mockery, humiliation, misgiving, defamation, mischievous offers of reconciliation, persecution, with regards the Prophet, His message and his followers etc. [v]

Along the way, opening up with Islam became dangerous to one's safety, more especially someone from a less-privileged family or lower-class clan. Thus, in an attempt to bypass the daily aggressions of the Meccan community, a hide-out tactic was resorted to, whereby Muslims were enjoined to be secretly gathering in 'Arqam House', a house belonged to one Muslim brother, located in a Meccan suburb. Arqam House served as a refuge and center for all Muslim and Islamic affairs.[vi]

It is worth noting here that, resorting to Arqam House did not in any way mean shunning or isolation from the mainstream Meccan community. Instead, Arqam House was meant for safety only, because, all that while, the Prophet PBUH did not boycott the Ka'aba[vii], which was the city's downtown and religious center, despite all the insults, worshippers of over three hundred idols placed in-and-out the Ka'aba, and many other practices inconsistent with his mission. Instead, He used to visit it as normal, for daily prayers and preaching, along with few Muslims of high-profile backgrounds.[viii]

Likewise, Muslims normally engaged in the daily social interactions of the pagan Mecca, as ordinary citizens, friends and kinsmen, without thinking of isolating themselves therefrom, in terms of most aspects of lifestyle, attire or appearance.

Even before Islam, the Prophet PBUH participated in many social activities, like *al-Fudhul* alliance, in which accord was reached upon prevention of injustice within Mecca metropolis, which the Prophet PBUH praised even after Islam.[ix]

A noteworthy point in the early Meccan phase is that, despite the bitter aggressions and provocations waged against Muslims, it was totally prohibited for a Muslim to take reciprocal action of any kind. Instead, they were continuously been admonished on self-restraint, good patience, forgiving and overlooking, as mentioned in different verses of the Holy Quran, like

چ ئو ئۇ ئۇ ئۆ ئۆئۈ ئۈ ئې ئې ئې ئى ئى ئد ى ى ي چ

"And endure You patiently (O Muhammad), Your patience is not but by Allah, and grieve not over them and be not distressed because of what they plot". 16:127,

چ ئۇ ئۇ ئۆ ئۆ چ

"So, be patient (O Muhammad), with a good patience". 70:5,

and



tolerant and friendly to Muslims than people of other faiths, like Jews and polytheists as laid down by the Quran:

چ ے ے ۓ ۓ ڭ ڭ ڭ ۇ ۇ ۆ ۆ ۈ ۈ ۇٴ ۋ ۋ ۅ ۅ ۉ ۉ ې ې ى ى ئا ئا چ

"Verily, You will find the strongest among men In enmity to the believers (Muslims) the Jews and those who are polytheists/pagans, and You will find the nearest In love to the believers (Muslims) those who say: "We are Christians." that is because amongst them are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant". 5:82.

3.2.2.1 Muslims in Abyssinia

King Negus welcomed the Muslim refugees from Mecca into his kingdom. He gave them sanctuary, and they enjoyed peace, security and freedom of worship under his aegis[xiv].Here, the Muslim community was not a mere minority, but, also, an asylum seeker with different faith, ethnicity, norms, language and many other things.

Like Mecca, Abyssinia was not a Muslim society, but, its king, Negus, enshrined rights of the Muslim minority, and gave them protection and full freedom of faith.[xv] Indeed, the society was much friendly, and life there was pleasant to Muslims.

On their side, the Muslim community lived in Abyssinia with sense of cooperation, loyalty and devotion. They immensely integrated in the society without any sort of isolation or prejudice, in times of ease and hardship.

Ibn Hisham reported that, a rebel once outraged against King Negus, in an attempt to overthrow him. The Muslim refugees, to show their loyalty, stood still for the legitimate authority of Negus, through supplications and well wishes.[xvi]

Ash-Shafi'i, Al-Balazari, As-sarkhasi and many other Muslim scholars went further to report that some Muslim refugees like Jafar bn Abi Talib fought in line with Negus forces in some of Abyssinian wars. [xvii]

However, as a result of the wise representation of Islam by the migrants, cordial relationship was established between the Muslims in Mecca and King Negus, which ended with him embracing Islam.[xviii]

3.2.2.2 Reactions of the Meccan community:

On the spread of the news of Muslims escape to Abyssinia, some riders were sent in their fetch. But the attempt ended up in futility[xix]. Relentlessly, the Meccan community plotted a trick for extradition of the Muslims from Abyssinia.

In this course, a delegation with Abu Sufyan as the Head, along with prestigious gifts were sent to Negus seeking from him to desert the Muslims and hand them over to them, a request turned down by Negus as a result of a wise and convincing statement made

by Ja'afar bn Abi Talib on the essence of the Islamic mission, in response to Abu Sufyan's allegations.[xx]

After return of the frustrated envoy, Meccans resorted to another trick; they mischievously sent a fabricated story to Muslims in Abyssinia that the Meccan community has embraced Islam. Out of their homesickness, on hearing the good news, Muslim migrants hurriedly returned to Mecca to find out that the whole story was nothing more than a cheap lie.[xxi]

3.2.3 The Early Medina Phase

In the tenth year of Islamic mission, after giving up hope for accepting Islam by the Meccan community, or at least de-escalation of the aggressions and insults, a divine permission came for the Muslims to migrate to Medina[xxii].

This permission was an aftermath of events and deliberations including conversion of some Medinan elites to Islam between the eleventh and thirteen years of the Islamic mission, spread of Islam in Medina and offer of the Medinans for the migration of Muslims and their pledge of allegiance and firm assurances of protection to the Prophet P.B.U.H.[xxiii]

3.2.3.1 Portraying the Medina Community

Medina, formerly known as *'Yathrib'*, was home to people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

In terms of ethnicity, Medina contained two major ethnic groups; Arabs as the natives and Jews as guest dwellers. Also, the Arabs were of two major groups; *al-Aus* and *al-Khazraj* known for the bitter hostility between them. Likewise, the Jews were of three groups; *an-Nadheer, Qainuqa',* and *Quraizha,* although they have adopted most of Arabic values, such as names, attire etc, but they continued to live in some outskirt separate areas of Medina.[xxiv]

The migrant Muslims constituted the third group of difference ethnic background.

In terms of religion, there were two major religions; Polytheism, embraced by Arabs and Judaism followed by Jews. With the arrival of Meccan Muslims, Islam became a third religion. Also, a fourth group emerged in form of Muslim traitors/hypocrites.[xxv]

3.2.3.2 Muslims in the Early Medinan Era

Despite the diversity of the early Medinan era, in terms of religiosity and ethnicity, Muslims, with the migrants and the native Medinans, constituted the vast majority of the Medinan population.

3.2.3.3 The Prophetic Treatment of Medinan Citizens

For the sake of establishing a better environment for the Muslims and a conducive atmosphere for Islam, the Prophet PBUH drew a suitable methodology for treating and interacting with each group in Medina, as follows:

i. The Jews:

The treatment of Jews by the Prophet PBUH was based on the considering them basically a people of a divine book and respected countrymen. This had been reflected in ways like giving them a noble nomenclature 'Ahl al-Kitab', i.e. people of the Book[xxvi], permitting marital relationship between Muslim men and Jewish women[xxvii], a practice strongly forbidden with Pagan or polytheist women, so also, beefs slaughtered by Jews were allowed for Muslim to consume, though ones slaughtered by pagans and polytheist were not permissible[xxviii], and other legislations showing kindness and respect for the Jews. However, kind return was not seen from the Jewish side, rather, conspiracies, provocations, insults and violation of pacts were reported[xxix].

ii. The Polytheists

Muslims considered the Medinan Polytheist as fellow citizens of a different faith, most of whom were from *Aus al-Lah* clan[xxx]. Despite been a weak minority, they were not compelled to embrace Islam, or adopt its teachings. On their side, they maintained status quo, as they did not show any adversarial tendency towards the Muslims[xxxi].

iii. The Traitors

They were a people outwardly Muslims and showing loyalty to Islam, but inwardly and in reality on the other side. They held bitter enmity towards Islam, which made them ever awaiting slightest chances to harm it[xxxii]. They were referred to by the Holy Quran as *'al-Munafiqun'* i.e. the hypocrites. Few of them were individually identified by the Muslims, due to the complicated, hidden and delicate nature of their stance. Nonetheless, Allah the almighty in the Holy Quran revealed some features and works of theirs in chapters like*, 'at-Taubah'*[xxxiii] *'Muhammad'*[xxxiv] and *'al-Munafiqun'*[xxxv].

The Prophet P.B.U.H. has, however reportedly disclosed to a companion identities of the traitors[xxxvi]. Interestingly, despite being clearly inspired about their identities, the Prophet P.B.U.H. opted not to take any apparent punitive action against them. The underlying idea of this decision was revealed by the Prophet P.B.U.H. as: *"I do not want people to be saying: Muhammad is executing his own disciples"* [xxxvii]. The traitors

played serious roles in stirring a series of unrest among Muslim clans and inciting non-Muslims against Muslims[xxxviii].

3.2.3.4 The Medina Charter

After the Muslim Community settled in Medina, in a quest to establish a stable society, the Prophet PBUH came up with a proposal to draw a constitutional charter aimed at considering the diversity of the new Medina. The followings are some key articles of the deal:

i. All the peoples of Medina shall be considered its rightful citizens, regardless faith or ethnic backgrounds.
ii. Jews are entitled to the use of their divine laws; also, they are rightful in appealing to Sharia Law.
iii. Peaceful coexistence between all national groups.
iv. Cutting all ties and allegiances with foreign enemies of Medina.
v. Ratifying the charter is optional, it does not in any way affect one's right to peace and security.
vi. The ultimate power rests with Allah and His messenger.

All the groups in Medina assented to the charter, but some Jewish groups failed to fulfill its contents, as a result of which the Prophet P.B.U.H. expulsed them from Medina.[xxxix] However, this phase marked the beginning of stability in the nationhood cause of the early Muslims. It was characterized mainly by power assumption, less or zero aggressions and well-planned coexistence.

3.2.4 The Late Medina Phase

Duration of this phase started circa the fifth year of Migration from Mecca to Medina. With this stage, the early Muslim nationhood attained maturity, whereby, its full identity as a political entity unveiled.

This phase was characterized by the following features:

1. Less religious diversity due to reduction in number of the Jewish clans and communities, also conversion to Islam by the followers of other religions.
2. Increase in number of traitors and their activities.
3. Reaching out in search for external recognition and alliance.
4. Massive conversion to Islam by Arab tribes.
5. Military strength leading to sets of victory over foreign enemies.

6. Sending ambassadors, governors and judges to remote areas within the Islamic territory. [xl]

In Medina, despite the Muslim community has attained mastery, several practices have been recorded as a clear exhibition of tolerance and respect for opposite faiths and cultures. This was symbolized in events like:

1. Confirming the citizenship of the Jewish community as well as establishing social and commercial ties with its members[xli].
2. Non-compulsion of the Jews to embrace Islam
3. Resolving social conflicts parties of other faiths
4. Humanitarian and complimentary stances [xlii]

4.0 Lessons for the Contemporary Muslim Communities from the Early Muslims Nationhood

Looking into the peculiarities of each of the above discussed phases of the early Muslims in their quest for a national entity, many lessons can be drawn for the contemporary Muslim communities. This can be presented as follows:

4.1 From the Meccan phase:

i. **Determination:** whereby, Muslims, despite being an oppressed minority and the strong temptations, they perseveringly stuck to their values and standards. Today, Muslim minorities need to consider this lesson in particular, as many of them live tendencies of melting in the majority through apostasy or relapse, as a result of fears or love for worldly gains.

ii. **Endurance:** a Muslim minority should not for the first instance decide to flee home, rather, to the farthest bearable extents stay, for the practical portrayal and propagation of Islam.

iii. **Integration:** the Meccan Muslim minority, to the permissible extents, integrated and opened up to the non-Muslim majority as per social, communal and cultural affairs, like naming, dress code, etc.

iv. **Peace:** the Meccan Muslim community maintained peace with the majority polytheist society throughout its thirteen-year life; no confrontations, provocations or retaliations.

4.2 From the Abyssinian Phase

With the massive migrations of Muslims to non-Muslim societies, due to political, economic, educational, security and many other factors, contemporary Muslim migrants share common features and experience with Muslim migrants in Abyssinia. But, here, the host communities may vary from Abyssinia, with regards tolerance and opening up. Whatever, the status of migration or refugee officially given to them is a vital advantage that guarantee them safety and, to some extent, freedom of faith and worship. It is therefore up to them to emulate from their predecessors in Abyssinia, with moderations and appropriate epochal and geographical considerations.

Accordingly, the followings are some lessons tapped from the Abyssinian phase, for contemporary Muslim refugees to consider:

i. Legality of migration to non-Muslim societies
ii. Official and due diplomatic process should be followed in asylum seeking
iii. Muslim refugees should, to the permitted extents, integrate in the host community
iv. Violence and unnecessary toughness should be avoided
v. Loyalty to the host societies should be maintained
vi. Values and orders of the host societies should always be respected.

4.3 From the Early Medinan Phase

The followings are deemed by the paper lessons drawn from this phase of the early Muslims nationhood:

i. Legality of citizenship conferment on non-Muslims in a Muslim community.
ii. Cooperation with non-Muslim in nation building
iii. The need for tolerance and restraint in coexisting with non-Muslim countrymen.
iv. Although, Muslims were the majority, they did not regard themselves as the sole owners of the Land.
v. The priority of peace and security-building over many other important considerations.

4.4 From the Late Medinan Phase

i. Wisdom, perseverance and faith led to success in establishing the first Muslim nation
ii. Rights of non-Muslim minorities were well respected by the ruling Muslim majority

iii. Hypocrisy, trait and other forms of internal malice should be expected by a successful nation, and wisdom should be applied in dealing with them.

5.0 Conclusion

After the above investigation, this paper arrived at that the early Muslim nationhood has undergone four stages and experiences, starting as an oppressed minority in its birthplace, to being a refugee and asylum-seeker, then a migrant, ending as a supreme state. Each of the four stages was characterized by different experiences and Muslims developed different approaches in dealing with each. It's observed that the early Muslim community, throughout its phases of nationhood, existed abreast peoples of other faiths. Also, attitudes of the early Muslim community towards other faiths had never been uniform, rather, separate approaches were applied to individual cases. The paper, as well, found that even at the peak of supremacy as a nation, the early Muslim community never denied other people right to their faiths. Given the experiences of modern Muslim communities, the paper found similitudes between them and the early Muslim nation. Also, given the nature and order of the contemporary world on one hand and the exigencies of the contemporary Muslim communities on the other, the paper found it relevant enough for them to draw as many lessons as possible from their ancestral experiences, for the sake of peaceful and fruitful existence and co-existence with other nations. The paper, also, found that the basis of relationship between Muslims and other nations was peaceful coexistence, while war was only an exception.

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[xxx] Ibn Hisham, ibid, 2: 286
[xxxi] Jumu'ah, ibid, p 86
[xxxii] See the Quran 2:14, 9:98 and 4:120
[xxxiii] Read for instance Taubah 9:42 -69 and 74-96
[xxxiv] Read for instance Muhammad 47:20–30
[xxxv] Read for instance Munafiqun 63:1–8
[xxxvi] Reported by Al-Baihaqi, Ahmad ibn Husain, *'as-Sunan al-Kubra',* 8: 347, Hadith No. 16844, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 3rd Ed., 2003
[xxxvii] See: Bukhari hadith No. 4907
[xxxviii] See: Bukhari, hadith No. 4905

[xl] For overview of the period spanning from the fifth year onward and it mentioned peculiarities, see: Ibn Katheer, Isma'il ibn Umar, *'al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah',* ibid vol. 4 p 105 onward
[xli] The Prophet PBUH himself practicalized this. For example, When Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) died while his armour was mortgaged with a Jew for thirty Sa' (measures) of barley. Saheeh al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 2916 and 4467.
[xlii] The Prophet PBUH had a Jewish houseboy. The Prophet PBUH visited him at his family house when he fell ill. See: Saheeh al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 900.