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Opinion Piece - Repairing the Cracked lens: Redefining British Muslim Identity in Conservative Britain

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The recent landmark election results in 2010 witnessed the end of an era for Labour under Gordon Brown and the herald of a new political landscape with the Coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The challenges for the new coalition are no less daunting than they were under the former government. The need to examine aspects of British identity from political and cultural perspectives has never been more poignant, especially in the face of continuing threats from domestic and international extremism – both far right and religious. The defeat of the BNP in Dagenham last year, resulting in all of its twelve councilors failing to be reelected can be considered a positive outcome for British politics so far as right wing extremism is concerned. The increase in Muslim MPs is also considered by many as another positive for British politics. While these apparent achievements may reflect the more appealing façade of the political climate, a redefining of who and what represents Muslim identity in 21st century Britain is necessary in view of the increasing misunderstanding and rictus gap between wider non-Muslim society and Muslim communities.

A question of legitimacy: Who can and should speak on behalf of British Muslims?

It can be argued that the very question of legitimacy is what underscored part of the Liberal Democrats' reasoning to align themselves with the Conservatives and form a coalition government. Labour was no longer considered a legitimate representative for this country's government in view of the losses inflicted upon them in the recent election. Brown was an unelected Prime Minister assuming the mantle of Tony Blair. The transfer of leadership was on the basis of Labour parliamentary protocol and while it may be argued that the Conservatives did not win unanimously, Labour lost unequivocally.

Legitimacy should also be the yard stick to measure those claiming to represent sections of British society. The BNP were resigned to defeat in east London as a racist, bigoted party, unrepresentative of the vast majority they claimed to represent. They placed emphasis on anti-Muslim sentiment in order to garner support from various communities, religious and irreligious, on the premise of creating resentment and fear of the 'alien other.' To some degree they have succeeded in attracting support from communities that were previously considered antithetical to



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their manifesto and objectives. For example, a few members from Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) communities now bolster the BNP's 'anti-Muslim' support. Claims of legitimacy are not confined to these groups alone; Muslim led organisations have emerged post 9/11 and 7/7 with claims of representing the 'silent majority' of Muslims etc. However, a closer look at the lens through which these groups claim self-legitimacy will reveal the cracks and inconsistencies that tends to permeate their often polemical positions which in themselves are unrepresentative of the very communities they allege to represent.

Indeed, the failure to examine and challenge the legitimacy of self-publicised stories or claims can be damaging to some of the communities from where these individuals or groups first emerge. In fact, such negligence in ascertaining the legitimacy of claims for the moral high ground have led to a proliferation of personalities either claiming a return from extremism, a return within the fold of democratic society as 'prodigal sons' or as experts in the field of counter-radicalisation and extremism. Prior to the emergence of an extensive budget for the previous government's Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Fund many of these voices were largely non-existent. Much criticism has been leveled against the PVE Funding; indeed, to a certain degree it is valid, especially insofar as it relates to the ineffectiveness of some organisations that received funding. The author of this account has himself been criticised for an altogether different reason; namely, that being a so-called 'non-violent radical' is part of the problem and not the solution. A direct response to such criticism can be in regard to the issue of legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness in tackling violent extremism at grassroots – are the entities involved succeeding or not? Another response to such criticism is the simple observation on the additional but important factor relating to consistency - such entities have been consistent over the past 15-20 years combating violent extremist propaganda. There have been no rudimentary shifts in either ideology or methodology unlike more recently established organisations whose founders have completely metamorphosed into more societally palatable groups in order to join the ever evolving counter-radicalisation arena. Is there anything to determine whether further transformations will occur in the future to accord with changing government policies and if so, what shape will they take? The chameleon-like characteristic of adapting to new environments and circumstances in order to fit either public or government perceptions or agendas should be a warning sign to policy makers and practitioners alike, particularly in the latter's race to provide 'quick-fix' solutions to counter violent radicalisation and terrorism among British Muslims today. The tendency to '*stir up anti-Muslim sentiment in an attempt to confer self-legitimacy*' [1] should be another clear indicator to err on the side of caution when attempting to identify credible voices or partners among Muslim communities.

Shared beliefs, shared values and social conservatism



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The socially conservative practices of some Muslims are increasingly being regarded as anti-social and a precursor to violent radicalisation. Yet many of these values held by such Muslims are akin to those of our parents and grandparents in 1940s-50s Britain. In fact, the values and beliefs held are not too dissimilar from those of the other Asiatic religions - Judaism and Christianity - yet there is no current discourse available which accuses these faiths of anti-socialism or violent – radicalism.

Indeed, there are many adherents to various aspects of social conservatism from different walks of life in the UK today and they are not marginalised for aspects of their beliefs or values that do not concur entirely with society. Indeed, they possess beliefs and values that accord more with traditional societal beliefs than those at odds with it. This is the same with the vast majority of Muslims. Many socially conservative Muslims have accepted a religious pluralism in Britain where they do not seek to impose their beliefs on others and, at the same time, not have some societal values – that have changed with the passage of time – imposed upon them as a requirement to prove their Britishness. Until now, the issue of religious social conservatism has been largely a one sided affair, dominated by the usual suspects who are the most vocal in seeking to define Muslim identity in 21st century Britain. There is a need to redress this imbalance.

Bridging existing areas of dissonance between Muslim communities and the wider majority society

British Muslim converts have an even more important role to play today in society in view of their dual identities. Their voices have, on the whole, been muted in part due to more vocal representations by the larger, predominant South Asian Muslim populace in Britain. While this is unsurprising due to the multifarious and complex social dimensions of this largely progressive section of Muslims, their representation of almost everything that is supposed to reflect Muslim ‘Britishness’ should now be reexamined in view of the existence and growing influence of British converts to Islam. Roald raises the following question when examining the impact of converts in a Scandinavian context:

How important is the role of new Muslims as intermediaries between Muslim communities and Scandinavian society? Is the particular position of new Muslims who have ‘one foot in each culture’ beneficial for a fruitful dialogue between the two cultures?

Muslim converts traverse all spheres of British society and yet their voices are seldom heard against the backdrop of socio-economic, political and religious issues that by and large relate to the predominant South Asian (and of late, increasingly Somali) culture.



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Converts may have greater empathy with non-Muslims because of their non-Muslim past and ongoing relationships with their family of origin. They often have a heightened awareness, compared to other Muslims, of how Muslims are viewed by outsiders, so there can be a strongly reflexive element to their discourse.

Without ignoring or marginalising the overwhelmingly positive contributions of these more predominant communities, British converts can play an invaluable role as conduits or bridge-builders between the wider non-Muslim society and the more culturally orientated Muslim communities. To varying degrees, some converts are already playing such roles, however not on the scale of their European counterparts:

New Muslims function on various levels in society and...[those] who have a role as intermediary between Muslim immigrant communities and wider Scandinavian society are mostly highly educated. As academics they have the ability to promote a balanced view of Islam and Muslims that might be accepted by majority society. They also tend...to distinguish between 'ideal Islam' and 'Muslim practice'...By this, non-Muslims might more easily understand the complexity and the problematic issues of Muslim communities in Western society.

The importance of converts' potential contribution between wider society and Muslim communities can no longer be ignored when considering the challenges of far right and religious extremism in society today.

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Notes:

[1] Bjorgo, T & Horgan, J: 'Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement,' Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009, p.19
Ibid, citing Zubeck, P. 'Cadets' guest speaker will focus on Christianity', Colorado Springs Gazette.

[2] Roald, A. S: 'New Muslims in the European context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts', Brill, 2004, p. 289

[3] Zebiri, K: 'British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives', Oneworld, Oxford, 2008, p.39

[4] Roald, A. S: 'New Muslims in the European context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts', Brill, 2004, p. 295
