

## Populism - Fanning the Flames of Islamophobia

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“Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today,” the French President, Emmanuel Macron exclaimed, in the wake of the ghastly beheading of a French history teacher by a Muslim immigrant. The statement reflects the sweeping generalizations made about Muslims as a repercussion of dastardly acts of a few. The Muslim community in the West lives in perennial fear of a knife attack, acid throwing, assault, and other forms of hate crimes. Populism has lent impetus to paranoia about Muslims and exacerbated the problem of Islamophobia—fear, hatred or prejudice against Islam and Muslims. Populism has been gaining momentum in the West in the recent past and, as a direct corollary, Islamophobia has also been on the rise.

Anti-immigrant bias is one of the manifestations of the nexus between populism and Islamophobia. In many European states such as Austria, Sweden, Germany and France, people are growing increasingly skeptical about immigrants. In fact, there are populist movements afoot demanding imposition of curbs on immigration. Muslims, especially in Europe, constitute a significant proportion of the immigrant population. For instance, Muslims comprise the fourth largest immigrant population in Norway. When the populists demand a crackdown on immigration, they *ipso facto* want the Muslims out of their countries, which creates anti-Muslim feelings and leads to Islamophobia.

Moreover, Gallup – an international analytics and advisory company – noted in its recent survey that racism has risen by 45% in Europe and 52% in the US. Racism has a direct correlation with Islamophobia. Most Western societies harbour pre-conceived notions about Muslims which impinge upon their progress. Women are denied jobs merely for donning *hijabs* and men also face discrimination if they keep beards. Racism – a consequence of populism – is one of the factors fanning the flames of Islamophobia.

Another factor that has become a driving force behind soaring populism in the West is ethnocentrism - a sociological phenomenon in which people belonging to one culture hold their values and beliefs to be superior to other cultures. People in the West deem their cultural values, norms and beliefs to be superior to the Muslim culture. They view Islam as a medieval religion that legitimizes and propagates violence, extremism and patriarchy. ‘Hijab’ is perceived as a symbol of repression of women. Such flimsy notions are reinforced by depiction of Muslims in Hollywood – that project Muslims as fundamentally evil, violent and primitive characters. Therefore, it is no surprise that majority of Western nations espouse ethnocentric proclivities.

Furthermore, nationalism has been gaining momentum in different parts of the world – from the US to India. While in some instances, nationalism could underpin integration and social solidarity, it could also induce castigation of the ‘other’. A case in point is India where a rising tide of Hindu nationalism has cast Muslims – who have been living there for hundreds of years – as ‘others’, and now being viewed as outsiders and invaders. Public discourse about Muslims, as a ramification of nationalism, has become acerbic. The Trump administration repeatedly issued anti-Muslim statements and insinuated the US as a country of and for the

‘white race’. These developments not only spurred hatred against African Americans, but also Muslims and Islam.

Additionally, Muslims have become scapegoats for populist leaders to blame for all the problems. Thus, Islamophobia is being used as a political tool to garner political support and to meet their own self-interests and agendas. This can be gauged from the fact that while Marine Le Pen – a populist leader in France – lost the presidential election by a narrow margin, Viktor Orbán – the populist Prime Minister of Hungary won an astounding victory in the central European state.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that there are factors internal to Muslim countries and communities that lend credence to populism and contribute to Islamophobia. For instance, recent beheading and knife slayings in France, and shootings in Austria at unarmed civilians by “Islamist terrorists” have further emboldened populist discourse against Muslims. Additionally, the dismal state of human rights in many Islamic countries play straight into the narrative of Muslims as backward and regressive. Accordingly, it is important to educate our own societies and inculcate true spirit of Islam.

Islamophobia is detrimental to world peace and harmony. It was only through espousing values of tolerance, pluralism and coexistence that the world has been able to phenomenally progress and develop in the last few decades. The way forward is to launch global initiatives, such as dialogue between Muslims and leaders of other faiths in a bid to build a better understanding between different religious communities. There is a need for world bodies like the United Nations (UN) to take collective action to discourage this phenomenon. Additionally, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) can also play a pivotal role in combating Islamophobia by jointly moving a resolution against religiously-inspired acts of violence, and taking effectual measures against radicalization in Islamic societies. Bridging the divisions that have grown as a product of vitriolic populist discourse is the only way to make sure that the march towards mutual progress and world peace remains undeterred.

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