

Recent Political Development and Muslims in South Africa

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Sheikh Nazeem Mohammed, life president of the Muslim Judicial Council, died recently. His death is a significant point of departure to discuss recent political development and Muslims in South Africa. I will try and provide a framework for this discussion.

I mention Sheikh Nazeem because much of the past twenty years of intensified political development is somehow connected with his life. His death signals an end to an era - for some positive, for others negative - but definitely an end - representing the possibility of further political progress and maturity but also containing the danger of political regression. With the resurgence of local resistance to apartheid in the late seventies and early eighties, the central debate was whether Muslims should be part of the broader movement for change or whether they should organise themselves separately as a force. The Call of Islam was started in the early eighties by a number of key activists to encourage Cupertino with the United Democratic Front. While those activists organised themselves separately, they also worked within the legal civic and political movements. Their argument for close participation with the liberation movements won the day and Sheikh Nazeem, leading the Muslim Judicial Council, gave expression to this position. Prior to 1994, Muslim political activity was influenced by this approach the benefits of which have become clear post 1994.

In the past six years alone, Muslims and Islam have progressed in leaps and bounds. In the national democratic parliament, close to ten percent of members of parliament

are Muslim - both men and women. With Muslims only constituting two percent of the nation, such representation is way out of proportion. Some of the most prominent legal positions in the country have gone to Muslims. This year we sadly lost Justice Ismail Mohammed who occupied the most senior legal position in the country. He was both active in his small community and firmly part of the broader South African nation. Muslims have been appointed as judges and magistrates and the head of all magistrates in the Western Cape is Ms Gadija Khan - no small achievement for a Muslim woman.

For the first time, the airwaves have been opened to this community with a number of radio stations operating allowing the expression of different viewpoints, enforcing too the participation of women. Christian national education has come to an end in the schools, making possible greater diversity in school life. Children are allowed to attend Friday prayers if they so wish and young women are rarely prevented from wearing scarves. Some schools now take Islamic dates into consideration when it comes to planning school events. Islam has been propelled to equal status with other major religions at formal state proceedings where a Muslim priest stands alongside a Christian, a Jewish and a Hindu priest.

While as yet not finalised, a process is in place to consider the role of Muslim personal law within our legal framework. Besides the exclusively Muslim media, many journalists who occupy key positions in both print and broadcast media broadly are Muslim. The list is endless if we consider the progress made within business, within medicine, within education.

So often we choose to bash ourselves and fail to recognise the enormous strides we have made as a community which allows us to hold our heads very high. The sacrifices of our parents and grandparents have not been in vain. Despite numerous difficulties and setbacks, an examination of the past twenty years alone shows just how far we have matured politically. If we just consider the array of outstanding individuals spread across the country firmly part of the national political spectrum, then we have to conclude that we occupy a respected and solid presence, astounding for so small a community. I am not suggesting that there are no problems. To the contrary. But let us not focus our minds only on the negative.

There is however a very real threat to this trend. This does not come from the broader political environment that we sometimes tend to obsess with. Instead, potential dangers come from within at two levels:

1. The right-wing violence from gangs and extremists that seems to play itself out in the Muslim community hold a real threat to progress made. We cannot ignore this. It is particularly alarming that political differences within our community are translated into violence against some. There have been death threats and violence against many - Ebrahim Moosa, Benny Gool, Gadija Khan, Moegsien Williams, Rashid Omar - the list is endless. Those Muslims who hold key positions within society should be supported not broken down.

2. The death of Sheikh Nazeem this week opens the way for further shifts within the political landscape. He teetered on the border of the centre and somehow tenuously maintained that position influencing many key organisations.

At both these levels, we could potentially move towards closing off from broader national life. The first seeks domination and exclusivity, which will isolate us. The second could see the setting in of an even greater conservatism, which could also lead to isolation. Both require awareness of factors within our experience, which elicits fear, encouraging our people to close off and hit out.

Jakes Gerwel at the recent Racism Conference said that history is made up of defining moments. We have reached such a defining moment in our history. Once again, it will depend on the conscious organisation that will go into preserving the gains made. I have absolutely no doubt that we have the capacity. What I am not sure of is whether we have the will.