

# Muslims in the Townships of South Africa

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## Introduction

South Africa has many townships and the number of Muslims is growing rapidly. This article is about the developing Muslim community in the townships of South Africa. I prefer the term 'developing Muslims' over the terms 'convert' or 'revert.' The largest number of developing Muslims is found in the biggest township of South Africa, Soweto. This gigantic township was once regarded as the University where all that was worthwhile was taught, from Marxism to Islam. Soweto lies to the southwestern side of the city of Johannesburg and has a population of three million people, most of them Christians. Most black people regard Soweto as the leader in innovation and politics. During the early eighties Soweto became home to a Masjid in a small suburb called Dlamini. With its walls struggling for completion for the past decade, Dlamini Mosque became the centre stage for developing Muslims.

Most townships are utilised as testing grounds for the establishment of theories and a first stop for membership for those proposing new definitions of Islam. They are also avenues for Muslim organisations seeking to dispose their Islamic duties of charity. Moreover, they are places where overseas counterparts are brought to prove our involvement in *da'wah* and our commitment to non-racialism. Townships are where photographs of poor and hungry black people can be obtained for fund raising campaigns.

Condescending as the above statements may sound, unfortunately this is the reality of certain attitudes towards the townships.

### **History of Islam in the Townships**

Islam in the townships emerged in the late seventies. However, due to various social impediments, it failed to surface convincingly. The Christian majority and much-politicised communist groups overwhelmed the tiny group of Muslims who were trying to introduce a new paradigm. Muslim pioneers in the townships came from Malawi and Mozambique. These people came to South Africa primarily seeking a better life and to obtain official South African residency; *da'wah* (propagation) was a secondary function. Most of these foreigners married in the townships and started families there. Xenophobia at the early stages of their arrival in the townships made the task of *da'wah* for some of them difficult.

Communism portrayed religion as the mechanism which the slave master used to control the minds of the slaves, the black people. Subsequently many people rejected religion in favor of communism. Furthermore, communists were deliberately friendly to the oppressed of this country, inside South Africa and in exile. They did not only extend the hand of friendship but provided arms to the liberation movements and made available resources that improved people intellectually as well. Academies in exile were created to teach people human skills. As a result, such efforts managed to win tremendous confidence in communism from the people.

Apartheid to a large extent impeded the growth of Islam in the townships because it not only prohibited people from staying together but also portrayed any other religion as a creation of the devil.

Then came the riots of June 1976, and during this period many people started moving from South Africa to the neighboring African countries, where most of them experienced Islam. Consequently, a large number of refugees accepted Islam, in defiance of Christianity. The existence of the new religion in exile filtered through to the black townships and many people began to embrace the new religion. What surprised many was that this was the same religion that was practiced by their neighbours in places like Sophiatown, District Six and other areas before the forced removals of the 1960's.

During the early nineties, when most exiled returned back home, they forged relationships with established Muslim communities. Here again, I prefer the term 'established' Muslims instead of 'Malays' or 'Indians.' It was at this time that most organisations received divine revelation to propagate Islam more aggressively in the townships. The most aggressive campaign was that of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat, a great man from Durban who published numerous booklets about Islam directed towards the developing Muslim community.

Through the hard work of the old stalwarts, and with the assistance of international and local organizations, Mosques were built. Mosques in most townships became refuges for those evading security forces in the 1980's and centres for most political activities. The

status of the Mosque and the doctrine taught gave Muslims recognition and Islam was gradually seen as a force to be reckoned with. Mosques became more vibrant and all kinds of people attended daily compulsory prayers. All this did not continue without problems and some of the new members of the community had their own agendas. This was to be expected since Islamic doctrine posed a threat to the apartheid regime. Given all these difficulties, Islam continued to grow and the birth of the Murabitun movement further enhanced the attractiveness of Islam in the townships. The Murabitun movement espoused the aspirations of the Young Lions (the name given to youth in the early 1980's) because it presented Islam as a religion that promotes justice and safeguards the right of the people to resistance.

The relationship between the established community and the developing communities during the political transitional period strengthened. Many black Muslims were seen in Fordsburg and other places where they were not seen before. Naturally, this interaction created an opportunity for both communities to know and understand each other better. This interaction between the two communities exposed huge weaknesses from both sides that were in the past overlooked. Tensions gradually developed, initially about the distribution of funds supposedly meant for all Muslims but unevenly distributed. Ugly scenes followed as a result, especially in Johannesburg. A tacit boycott of Mosques in the townships by the established community was once again resumed.

## **Democracy and Islam in the townships**

Post 1994 saw demographic changes in the townships, with more Muslims from other countries flocking into the townships, thereby introducing new schools of thought. As a result, further changes were once again brought about. Black Muslims were now opting for *Shi'ism* over other *Sunni* schools of thought simply to revolt against the established communities.

Hostility between the established and the developing Muslim communities grew even harsher and led to a march by a group of black Muslims to the Union building, followed by a letter of complaint to President Thabo Mbeki. A new movement opposed to the established Muslim community thus emerged. Grievances varied from racism, exploitation, to the unfair distribution of Zakaat as earlier mentioned. Many people in the established communities alluded to the fact that some of these grievances were legitimate. However, they questioned the integrity of lodging this dissatisfaction publicly. The exposing of these divisions amongst Muslims was the lowest point of political Islam in South Africa. Institutions such as Afro-Middle East Centre conducted reconciliation sessions to calm down the volatile situation and the embassy of Saudi Arabia also got involved to a lesser extent. Sadly the problems, especially racism, are spreading unabated in a community that is supposed to spearhead non-racialism. Furthermore, the problem of racism has jeopardised mobilisation campaigns for international causes concerning Muslims.

The third post 1994 phenomenon in the townships was that more Muslims abandoned township Mosques in favour of Mosques in the developed Muslim communities. Most of these Muslims sight the fact that lectures given in the townships, especially the Friday sermon, lacked content. Lectures in the Mosques in developing communities are generally directed towards newcomers to Islam, hence such perceptions. This new attitude has as a result further segmented the developing Muslim community.

### **Conclusion**

The number of Muslims in the townships continues to grow despite the problems. People come to embrace Islam by themselves, with less intervention by *Da'wah* movements. However, lack of proper facilities, support, and resources, lead many back to *Jahiliyah* (ignorance). Supporting structures need to be established to ensure that the developing Muslim community is intellectually and spiritually nourished. Furthermore, there is a need for more Mosques in the townships; most townships have only one Mosque. Alternative Mosques are needed for various reasons, most importantly, to reduce the distance between the Mosque and the individual Muslim.

Finally, racial tensions within Muslim communities have to be solved very soon. Unfortunately, most of those in power are reluctant to address this problem. We need to learn lessons from history, especially in Africa in the last century. The complacency of the Muslim community in a country where more than 98% of the population is not Muslim raises serious concerns. Islam must survive in this country but in order to do so a

comprehensive strategic plan has to be devised. International politics have changed and Muslims need more friends now than before.

Western powers are working day and night to convert our friends to foes. In South Africa Muslims still have people who can be called friends. Racism in our young democracy poses a great destructive future for minorities. The present volatile situation between developing and established Muslim communities is most likely to attract hostile factors that can easily damage Islam. We need to address the problem of racism immediately. Our survival depends on how well we live with the majority of this country. I believe that we need to do what ever we can to ensure the future of our children and society. We need to begin to respect and acknowledge the intellectual capability of the indigenous people of this country.