

Democracy and Multiple Muslim Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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In 2004 South Africans commemorated ten years of living in a post-apartheid society. This historic milestone marked the end of the second period of non-racial democratic rule in South Africa. The celebrations were accompanied by critical reflections on both achievements as well as on-going challenges. This paper explores the identity struggles of South Africa's small but influential Muslim community during this first decade of non-racial democratic rule. The paper is divided into two parts. The first section presents a demographic picture of Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa and the second part analyses the diverse ways in which the major Muslim ideological movements have engaged the democratic process in South Africa. The paper argues that the varied responses of Muslim movements to the democratic process in South Africa have had significant implications for the relationship Muslims develop between their religious identity and their citizenship of democratic South Africa, which has inevitably added yet another layer to their already disparate identities.

The Demographic Picture of Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa

It would be expedient to begin by presenting a statistical overview of the demography of Muslims in contemporary South Africa. The figures we shall introduce are derived from the second democratically supervised population census, which was conducted in 2001. According to this census report, Muslims constituted only 1.5% of the total population of South Africa.¹ More significantly for our purposes, the census ironically continues to employ the racial categories of the apartheid era.² The question

that this raises, is to what extent have these multiple “ethno-Muslim” identities been transformed by the post-apartheid state’s project of nation-building?

Table 1- Muslim Demography in South Africa ³

Racial Categories	
African	74 701
Coloured	296 023
Indians	274 931
Whites	8 409
Total	654 064

There are at least three critical points in relation to the question of Muslim identities in post-apartheid South Africa that emerge from the above table. **First, close to half of the total Muslim population of South Africa are classified by the 2001 Census under the amorphous apartheid category of “coloured” (meaning mixed ancestry) and reside predominantly in the Western Cape Province.** The other major “ethnic” category in which Muslims predominate is “Indian” and a large percentage of these Muslims reside in the provinces of Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that their influence in these provinces is significantly larger.

Second, compared to the figures in the 1996 Census, Islam appears to have grown significantly among the “black African” communities who now make up close to 12% of South Africa’s Muslims. Haron has argued that this expansion can be attributed to both the embracing of Islam by some township youth, as well as the growing numbers of African Muslim refugees from countries such as Malawi, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁴ Notwithstanding the steady growth of “black

African” Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa a number of commentators argue that they continue to be marginalized.⁵

Third, in a recent essay, Vahed and Jeppie have cogently demonstrated that South Africa’s Muslims are sociologically diverse; “[T]hey are divided along race, class, gender, ethnicity, language and beliefs”.⁶ **Multiple identities are not unique to Muslims, but are common among South Africans. It bedevils the projects of those who seek to construct identity as well as those who study it as a reified phenomenon.** The critical question before us is to what extent do the various sectors of the Muslim community perceive themselves to be an integral part of, or alienated and estranged from, the broader South Africa nation?

Muslims and the Democratic Process in South Africa

Muslims have taken on two broad roles in the democratic process in South Africa. The first essentially involves an embrace of the democratic process of advancing the broader goals of the nation as a whole, as well as their own particular interests, such as their successful pursuit of the recognition of Muslim Personal Law by the South African legal system. Moreover, during the 1994, 1999 and 2004 national elections, Muslims not only voted in large numbers but more significantly, a number of Muslim candidates were elected, representing all major political parties in the South African Parliament.⁷ After the 1999 elections Shuaib Manjra argued that, “If one engages at the level of head-counting Muslims in Parliament we find a percentage that is approximately five to seven percent in the National Assembly and National Council of Provinces. The vast majority of these belong to the African National Congress...”⁸ For Manjra, this represents that in the new democracy many Muslims, including himself, have begun to make a critical identity shift

from seeing themselves as Muslim South Africans to that of South African Muslims. He argues his case as follows: "...if you forgive the semantics and spare me the platitudes of being Muslim first. I see these two identities as constituting an organic whole-not separate parts and certainly not mutually exclusive. Our Islam informing our South Africanness and vice versa. Trying to separate these identities would be akin to removing the Arabness from the life of the Prophet (on whom be peace)."⁹ It would be intriguing to discover just how many of South Africa's Muslims would embrace such a view?

The election of Ebrahim Rasool, a former leader of the Call of Islam, as the first Muslim Premier of the Western Cape in April 2005 has further strengthened the already strong position of those Muslims who advocate the positive engagement of the democratic process in post-apartheid South Africa. Voting patterns indicated that large numbers of Muslims voted for the ANC which led Rasool to claim in one of his victory speeches that, 'the fact that the President of this country could elect a Muslim as Premier even though most people in South Africa are not Muslims, says a lot for the respect Islam has in this country.'¹⁰ Vahed and Jeppie view this statement as reflective of the feelings of the majority of Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa.¹¹

In contradistinction to the above position, some view the Muslim community at odds with the state. From this perspective, Muslims are placed within the context of the oppressed and exploited masses of South Africa, but are called upon to resist the new state. The resistance is viewed as essentially a continuation of the anti-apartheid struggle. The new state is seen as illegitimate because it is the outcome of a dubious negotiated settlement that compromised justice.

In 1994, shortly before South Africa's first non-racial democratic elections, the newly formed Islamic Unity Convention (IUC) adopted this rejectionist political stance toward the "peace and reconciliation process" and called on Muslims to boycott the elections.¹² The majority of Muslims have largely ignored this call, as is clear from their enthusiastic participation in all three post-apartheid national elections. However, the rejectionist political posture continued to live on in the Islamic rhetoric and activities of the IUC.

I contend that the Muslim vigilante movement, People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad), which in August of 1996 burst onto the national scene with its organized campaign of killing drug dealers and bombing their homes, cannot be understood without reference to this rejectionist political position. Whilst Pagad's stated cause of fighting the proliferation of crime and drug cartels resonated with large numbers of South Africans, most, including the vast majority of Muslims, were outraged by their heavy-handed tactics. More disconcerting however, was a tendency in policy and academic analysis to refuse to engage with the underlying political agenda of Pagad. State apologists preferred to ignore the indigenous roots of Pagad and instead chose to discredit it as an "Islamic fundamentalist" movement. Even more alarming however, was the media stereotyping of "an Islamic fundamentalist threat" and the South African security establishment's investigation of possible links to international Islamic groups, such as Hamas and Hizbullah.¹³ This discourse fostered a backlash of anti-Muslim sentiment in the broader community. At the height of the Pagad campaign in the Western Cape, two individuals were forced off a vehicle just because they were dressed as Muslims. This led Pagad's catholic priest, Fr.Christopher Clohessy, to argue that; "One of the fruits of Pagad - not

part of its agenda - has been to highlight the disproportionate levels of anti-Islamic prejudice in the worldview of Christina, clergy and laity alike".¹⁴ An intriguing question which lies beyond the scope of this paper is why so many analysts of the Pagad phenomenon stubbornly refused to engage its underlying political ideology.

The costs in lives and resources, as well as the negative impact and tension that resulted from Pagad's four year reign of terror have yet to be calculated. It is clear however, that both the sensationalized press coverage of the Pagad phenomenon and the problematic role of the police, pushed some Muslims to become more sympathetic to the anti-state stance of Qibla and the IUC. Ironically, for the ardent supporters of Pagad, who by and large were not politically sophisticated, citizenship of the non-racial and democratic South Africa became an enigma. **They experienced a negative tension between their Islamic identity and their South African citizenship with consequences of "precarious marginality"**. This identity crisis led increasing numbers of Muslims to turn inward and become self protective. These Muslims began to separate themselves from the dominant political discourse. For the ideologues of Pagad, the margins functioned as a kind of institutionalized shelter and place of voluntary exile, and from here they were able to derive at least some of their efficacy and power. The margins became a launching pad for sustained assaults on the public discourse, which they denounced as being anti-Islamic and unjust. The negative impact of the Pagad phenomenon on the Cape Flats community in general and the Muslim community in particular is incalculable. Its political repercussions will remain with us for a long time to come.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in the first decade of non-racial democratic rule in South Africa Muslims have taken on two broad roles in the political process in South Africa. The majority of Muslims has embraced the democratic process and despite their small number has assumed a role whose significance far outweighs expectations, given their minority status. I propose that this positive role can be attributed to two key factors; first, the psychological posture of advantageous marginality bequeathed by the Call of Islam's vociferous role during the anti-apartheid struggle. Second, positive Muslim identity affirmation is also an outcome of the post-apartheid state's overt commitment to a policy of religious pluralism, which creates an unprecedented space for the full expression of religious observances and practices.

The paper has also highlighted the fact that there exists an opposing Muslim political role in post-Apartheid South Africa. In this role, the Muslim community is placed at odds with the state and is called upon on to resist the process of reconciliation since they believe that it is the product of a flawed negotiated settlement that compromised justice for the oppressed masses of South Africa. Their resistance is essentially viewed as a continuation of the anti-apartheid struggle. While the majority of Muslims have largely ignored this call, the belligerent political posture that it represented persevered in the campaign of vigilante violence of Pagad between 1996 and 2000. The effects of Pagad's campaign of urban terror have been to create a climate of despair and alienation for some sections of the Muslim community. Its consequence has been the development of what I have called a psychological posture of "precarious marginality". These Muslims began to experience a negative tension between their religious identity as Muslims and their citizenship of democratic South Africa. Although the political

repercussions of the Pagad campaign will live with us for a long time to come, judging from the enthusiastic manner in which the Muslim community participated in the 1994, 1999 and 2004 general elections, it would seem that by and large they are engaging the South African democratic process positively and strategically. The real challenge for Muslim identity in post-apartheid South Africa is to transcend their 'racial' divide.

¹ Some Muslim scholars believe that the total Muslim population could be much higher. See for example Muhammad Haron, "Undercounting or Overcounting South Africa's Muslims: The Era of Democracy (Censuses 1996 and 2001). Notwithstanding their small percentage a number of observers have noted that such statistical indicators do not possibly measure the cultural impact of Islam. Tayob for example has observed that statistics do not reflect the qualitative experience of being Muslim in South Africa. Abdulkader Tayob, "Counting Muslims in South Africa" in *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* (Cape Town: Centre for Contemporary Islam, UCT, 1996).

² I find the apartheid racial categories highly problematic. There is no scientific basis for it, yet, it continues to be part of the legal and social realities of post-apartheid South Africa.

³ Source: Census 2001 Webservice (www.statssa.gov.za).

⁴ Muhammad Haron, "Undercounting or Overcounting South Africa's Muslims: The Era of Democracy (Censuses 1996 and 2001).

⁵ Tahir F Sitoto, "Imam Essa al-Seppe and the 'emerging and unorganized African Muslim sector: A contextual analysis', in *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa 5*. Cape Town: Centre for Contemporary Islam, UCT.

⁶ Abdulkader Tayob, "Counting Muslims in South Africa" in *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* (Cape Town: Centre for Contemporary Islam, UCT, 1996).

⁷ For details on the number of Muslims in the South African Parliament see: Shuaib Manjra.

⁸ Shuaib Manjra, "Post-apartheid South Africa and Muslim Political Involvement, unpublished paper presented at the OIC/CTD conference on Muslims and Political Development in Southern Africa, Johannesburg, 24 April 1999.

⁹ Manjra, op.cit.

¹⁰ *Al Qalam*, April 2004.

¹¹ Vahed and Jeppie, "Multiple communities", p. 279.

¹² Abdulkader Tayob, "Islamism & PAGAD: Finding the Connection", in *Drugs, Gangs, People's Power: Exploring the PAGAF Phenomenon*, edited by Raashied Galant & Fahmi Gamiieldien, Claremont Main Road Mosque Publication, 1996, pp.31.

¹³ For a detailed study of the PAGAD phenomenon, see *Drugs, Gangs, People's Power: Exploring the PAGAD Phenomenon*. Edited by Raashied Galant and Fahmi Gamiieldien. (Cape Town: Claremont Main Road Masjid, 1996).

¹⁴ Christopher Clohessy, "Thoughts on Pagad", in *Drugs, Gangs, People's Power: Exploring the PAGAD Phenomenon*, edited by Raashied Galant & Fahmi Gamielidien, Claremont Main Road Mosque Publication, 1996, pp.70...

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