Change, Reforms &
The Problem of Meaning

by

Zaki Jalil

"…it cannot be denied that the so called 'reformers' are not really reformers. We would be more accurate in referring them as deformers."

Syed Hussein Alatas

Introduction

As our community is plagued with many problems, many voices too can be heard suggesting potential solutions. Similarly, as the problems are varied and complex, so do the variety of solutions proposed: from making abstaining from pre-marital sex appear more sexy, to having a list of ten desired attributes for all Muslims to be moderated with; from pairing up each youths with a mentor, to the ever famous graduates' tea party in posh hotels.

A few of these solutions are derived from rigorous social analysis but the great majority has none whatsoever and merely from the opinions of the change agents and their sponsors and/or a cut-and-paste approach from what worked in the past onto the perceived-as-similar present, or so it is rationalized that way. What these proposed solutions do suggest though is that there is a need for change. I have argued previously[1] that the intelligentsia is the key to much desired progress. Those interested in educating the intelligentsia of our community must encourage the intelligentsia to look and scrutinize the many programs that claim to change the situation of the community for the better.

---

[1] Please refer to the Epilogue in Azhar Ibrahim Alwee and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, eds., *Moral Vision and Social Critique: Selected Essays of Syed Hussein Alatas* (yet to be published)

Before we discuss this, we need to understand that there is a great difference between change and progress. Sometimes, resisting change can be more progressive than accepting it. Surely, spending hundreds of dollars per graduate on a tea party in a posh restaurant cannot be as progressive as using the same amount to sponsor publications or workshops specifically directed to educate the future intelligentsia of the community. We should be wary that sometimes, in the desperate need for progress, we acquire the habit of getting excited whenever something new is thrown to us and accepting whatever is recommended to us. A healthy appetite for progress and change can also cause us to imbibe destructive ideas, causing intellectual indigestion and therefore leaving a huge mess for future generations of intelligentsia to clean up. This habit of accepting every new idea, every new slogan and every new cliché available, burdens the future generations of intelligentsia. Already, the move towards progress from any moment in time is hindered by the powerful and already stable present systems that maintain the status quo. These systems, derived from historical and cultural factors, as well as from the traumatizing effects of colonization, can be handled easier if preceding generations of intelligentsia know when to accept change, when to reject change and how to cope with the changes that are being imposed on the community.

The Nature of Change

What do we mean when we say, "There is a need to change"? When we mention 'change', it is natural for us to ask three important questions: (1) why must we change, (2) what must we change, and (3) how do we change. The first question occupies itself with the individual realization that something is wrong. The status quo often either gives a false sense of security or a feeling of despair– that we are fighting a losing battle against a very stable system as mentioned above. Thus, for our community to be emancipated from oppressive structures within itself or externally, the intelligentsia must acquire: (a) a sense of hope,[2] (b) a

---

[2] "The appreciation of the significance of hope in our life is therefore important. Hope, properly understood is never passive or timid. Hope represents the best of human endurance, enabling us to readjust our thinking and action in order to achieve a desirable end." Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, *Islam, Religious and Progress: Critical Perspectives* (Singapore: The Print Lodge, 2006), p. 8.

sustainable stamina to study the community's problems at all levels, and (c) the ability to empathize with the fate of the less fortunate.[3]

For the second question– "What must be changed?"– a careful diagnosis of the community's ills must be studied un-sterilized from the context of the bigger society. It must take into account the socio-political and economic reality of those who we desire to change. Change should not be imagined just as the rolling out of policies, managing publicity events, 'the-press-is-present-and-taking-photos' campaigns, or even 'ribbon-cutting' ceremonies and speeches.[4] These course of actions for change bear no meaning to the many in the lower social class as their lives and conditions will not significantly change with publicity events where in most cases, they were not even invited and the physical pedagogical sites where these events are carried out is so far away from where the community heartlanders dwell. These displays and spectacle of events are what we should call 'superficial attempts' to change because the core of the problems often remain untouched. In many ways, they are similar to what Alatas referred to as 'deformers' instead of 'reformers'.[5] When the masses who bear the brunt of these problems are totally unaware of these events, or if they do they find no meaning in the proposed changes and the situation remains the same, the intelligentsia must know that this cannot be seen as resistance, of the so-called 'problematic mentality' of the masses. It could very well be a simple case of them still not knowing how to handle the change. When such reform efforts fail, the blame should not be on the masses but on the managers of the change who came up with the ineffective or even inappropriate programs.

---

[3] Please read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

[4] Similar to what Frantz Fanon wrote in '*Wretched of The Earth*' (p. 85), the elite will attach a fundamental importance to organization, so much so that the fetish of organization will often take precedence over a reasoned study of society.

[5] Though Alatas was referring to Muslim Revivalism, the idea of change and reform and how they are imagined is somewhat similar: "If we use reason as the criteria by which to judge which is more rational and beneficial to mankind, then it cannot be denied that the so called 'reformers' are not really reformers. We would be more accurate in referring them as deformers." Syed Hussein Alatas, "Perceptions of Muslim Revival," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 97, p. 380.

Change efforts must target changes at the cultural level and changes in the habits of the mind of the community at the heart of the problem. It should target the people and not the image of the sponsors. Perhaps, we should start to examine closer whether the innovations in the past that we had and the community funds that it spent, were adopted for symbolic, personal or political reasons rather than targeting real change. Were they to appease community and political pressure or simply to just appear innovative? Were changes adopted by those on their way up the political ladder or to seek power and influence within the community? As the intelligentsia experiences and imagines change, it must be able to identify who benefits from the change: the agents of change or the target of change?

The third question – on "How we need to change?" – is the most interesting one. This is a huge complex task. The collective imagination of the intelligentsia must consider simultaneously many factors all at one time. Change needs more than just good intentions to work, especially those sprouting from the middle-class mentalities of the sponsors. It needs, most often than not, hard-to-come-by resources of the community usually entrusted to organisations and institutions. Though it is arguably true that without resources, even good ideas can turn bad, but too much resources entrusted on a bad idea is really just as bad. Hence, especially in Muslim-Minority Singapore, the capacity of organisations and other institutional factors need to be scrutinised.

Change also needs rigorous analysis of the problems at hand. We need to look into the quality of research our institutions and organisations are producing. Are the researches done communicated to the bigger public, at least to the intelligentsias, or are only the celebratory type of data that are shared in expensive booklets in glossy paper? How can we expect the intelligentsia to be interested and engaged to issues if they are not informed of the scope and scale of the existing problems? Are we still Bebalians[6] – reacting to problems and still unable to anticipate those that might happen in the future? Most importantly, change needs time. A sustained effort is needed to ensure that the problems raised do not become

---

[6] "… Bebalians have no power of anticipation. They usually react to an event after it has happened…" Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass Publishers), 1977.

just yet another flavour of the month. A problem would seldom go away magically after a huge high-publicity campaign.[7]

Not all intelligentsias can be found within community-based organisations and institutions though. Furthermore, organisations and institutions should also be imagined as a group made of many individuals. This, therefore, means that the ability to change a community's course really depends on the aggregate capacity of individuals within the organisation and the programs that caters to these capacities as well as the individual intelligentsias without these organisations. This must include the quality of leadership and leadership development, the quality of staff and staff development,[8] the values the organisation articulates and the intellectual quality of the programs.

Conclusion

Our community is plagued with many problems and we are told of this frequently. Still, there exist problems that we are not aware of that might be occurring right in front of us, i.e. problems that are more fundamental. This simple essay is suggesting that perhaps one of these hidden problems is the inability to understand the mechanics of and issues related to change. This could probably be due to the community's critical inexperience[9] with change. For the intelligentsia to understand what it really takes to effect real change in the community is as much a matter of critical consciousness[10] as to understanding the power

---

[7] "… the leaders undertake many actions that make it possible for them to pretend they are doing something effective to avoid a catastrophe… an impression that the problems are recognized and something is done to resolve them. Yet nothing of real importance happens; but both the leaders and the led anaesthetize their consciences and their wish for survival by giving the appearance of knowing the road and marching in the right direction." Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (London: Abacus, 1976), p. 19.

[8] Here, I do not mean having staff going through courses on how to answer a phone politely and smile when you meet and organizational client. Surely, this is good but definitely staff development needs more than this.

[9] Read Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 1975, r.2005), p. 19.

[10] "Critical consciousness means that one questions, and one does not take things for granted…Criticality is not cynicism. It fosters a dialogic spirit. It is an experience of learning through examining, sharing and suffering. It is intense. It is passionate. Not surprisingly, criticality leads to profound humanism – commitment to a life-long project that is free from exploitation, domination, injustice and violence. In other words, critical consciousness requires an intensely thoughtful, passionate, and philosophic mind." Avjit Pathak, *Social Implications of Schooling: Knowledge, Pedagogy and Consciousness* (Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2002), p. 239, cited in Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, "The Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim

relations and the political, social, economics and cultural forces that exist within the community and the bigger social context.

[August 2007]

Societies" in Lai Ah Eng and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, eds., *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006).