

# **The 'Liberal Islamists'**

## **A Preliminary Observation**

*by*

Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib  
[imran@thereadinggroup.sg](mailto:imran@thereadinggroup.sg)

### **Introduction**

**T**here is a new phenomenon that creeps into Muslim societies lately. I am referring to a certain 'conversion' of Islamists to the so-called 'liberal' and 'progressive' mode or stance. In other words, we are increasingly seeing the shift of Islamists away from their defining oppositional anti-State, anti-West and anti-secular rhetoric and into the adoption of the language of progressiveness and liberal thought marked by discourses promoting pluralism, inclusiveness, tolerance, democracy, equality and even co-existence. I term these new breed of Islamists as the 'liberal Islamists'.

The liberal Islamists today operate in many fronts that used to be the intellectual and cultural domains of progressive and liberal Muslims. One such field is the arena of interfaith dialogue. If Islamists of the past make no apology for trying to prove the Other's belief system as corrupt and false (and thus continuously seek to convert them to Islam), the liberal Islamists today adopt the language of 'understanding' and 'tolerance' and are at the forefront of forging interfaith dialogues; yet, their fundamentalist streak remains – the liberal Islamist has not abandoned the exclusive paradigm that marks their worldview and still harbors the thought of 'bringing the Other to Islam' (which ultimately means converting them formally as professed Muslims). If in the past, the Islamists adopted confrontational polemical debate-style strategies (especially targeted to Christians), the new liberal Islamists chose to present 'the beauty of Islam', which, valid as it may be, is merely used as a tool of trying to 'win them over to Islam'. All these are done with the subconscious assertion of "Islam is

superior” and “Non-Muslims will definitely burn in Hell indefinitely”. In short, ideologically, there is no change; only the strategy changes. And this is due to the necessity of adapting to new changes in global and local outlooks.

## **The Rise of Liberal Islamists**

What caused the emergence of the Liberal Islamists? There are at least 3 major factors. *Firstly*, what we had seen from the late 1980s onward is a certain failure of Islamist ideology to take root in society and brought the kind of transformation envisioned by their ideologues. An Islamist is essentially a political animal. Thus, one of the main objectives of the Islamist agenda is to establish an Islamic State – the details of which remain obscure and poorly developed to this day. Yet, this agenda became increasingly utopian as the kind of society that is supposed to be governed by *Shari'a* and thus solved all of society's ills and problems, did not materialize. Throughout the world, there is no successful model of a truly 'Islamic State', whatever it means. Poverty, underdevelopment and corruption remain rampant in countries that were supposedly hailed as 'Islamic'. In fact, these so-called 'Islamic' societies had seen tremendous abuse of power, authoritarianism and violence, despite the implementation of *Shari'a* that is supposed to bring greater justice compared to other 'Western' models. It is this 'failure of political Islam', to borrow Olivier Roy's description, that forced many Islamists to rethink their approaches and strategies. Eventually, many chose to adopt the dominant language (of democracy, tolerance, pluralism, etc) in a bid to regain their lost grounds with the wiser and more mature Muslim public, as well as to avoid the gaze of the authorities who are now more wary of the subversive tendencies of the Islamists, no thanks to a small group of increasingly militant offshoots of Islamism that are now termed as 'terrorists'.

*Second*, Islamism is in itself devoid of any genuine and sound methodology. Its ideology is a hollow resemblance to Islam, with selective attachment to certain symbols and forms that are useful to evoke a sense of (false) pride in Islam. Throughout the history of Islamism, there has been no serious attempt to develop systematically the content of their ideology, other than to repeat tired clichés and slogans. Given the bankruptcy of Islamist thought and their poor appreciation of Islam's complex and diverse intellectual and cultural

historical legacies, one finds that Islamists are too readily willing to cling on to any discourses that come along their way – as long as these discourses are useful to further their own agendas and saved them from total obliteration and lost of confidence in public eyes. Thus, liberal Islamists see no conflict in values to assert the supremacy of Islam in private, yet extolling the virtues of pluralism for the public. This shift itself is borne of necessity: When Islamists are in power, they are often oppressive in imposing their version of Islam; yet, when they are in a compromising position, they call for tolerance and acceptance of pluralism.

*Third*, the development of Islam, particularly in the West and in non-Arab societies (with the exception of Pakistan), there is a greater acceptance of progressive and liberal ideas, and simultaneously, a rejection of the sharp division of 'us-verses-them' thesis that is ever a feature of Islamist (and all other fundamentalist) thought. With the September 11 attacks that killed close to 4000 people, Muslims worldwide are beginning to question the rhetoric of hate harbored in Islamist discourses and found a new language of 'peace', 'tolerance' and 'understanding' that has been consistently developed by progressive and liberal Muslim scholars and thinkers. This, in itself, posed a challenge to the position of Islamists who have always yearned for Muslim support by claiming to be the only true and authentic voice of Islam. Given the change in event, Islamists felt a need to 'ride the wave of change and reform' and thus adopted the very language that was once promoted by the progressive and liberal voices within Islam.

### **The Distinction between Classic Islamists and Liberal Islamists**

To further clarify the phenomenon of the emergence and rise of liberal Islamists today, there is a need to show how they differ from their predecessors – the *classic* Islamists.

There are at least 5 characterizations of a pure Islamist:

- (1) An Islamist calls for the establishment of an **Islamic State**;

- (2) The constituent of an Islamic State is most often than not, reduced to the **implementation of *Shari'a***, which is further reduced into certain areas such (a) enforcement of *hudud* (Muslim penal code which includes chopping of hands for theft, flogging or stoning for adultery, etc), (b) removal of usury and interest (understood as *riba*) from banks and the economy, (c) banning of vices such as gambling and drinking alcohol, (d) formation of moral squads to ensure public obedience on what has been outlined as 'Islamic' and 'unIslamic', and (e) imposition of *hijab* (veil) and other similar Islamic codes of conduct as defined by them;
- (3) The objective of establishing an Islamic State requires political consciousness and active social participation, which is backed by **power discourse** that incorporates management terms and jargons. As such, an Islamist is most often, an activist who aspires to certain high-profile positions in order to impose (or in their language, 'Islamize') society with certain non-negotiable 'fundamentals' of Islam. Yet, an Islamist knows that to get to positions require mass base support. If an Islamist does not join an Islamic political party, he or she is most certainly to be involved in Islamist social activities. These include conducting leadership camps and small *usrahs* (discussion circles to read, reflect and discuss Islamic teachings, particularly those articulated and written by fundamentalist ideologues) to cultivate cadres who will share and support his or her agenda.
- (4) An Islamist uses exclusionary language, with divisions and boundaries clearly marked and more often than not, relying on a **binary vision of the world** – Muslim/*kafir*, *darul Islam*/*darul harb*, Islamic/unIslamic (*jahiliyyah*); *halal*/*haram* etc. At the same time, there is a preoccupation with using slogans, clichés and other forms of rhetoric, such as: 'Islam is *ad-Deen*'; 'Islam is the solution'; 'No separation of religion and politics in Islam'; 'We must establish God's rule on earth'; 'West is secular, atheistic, decadent and morally corrupt'; and 'there is a (global) Jewish/Zionist conspiracy';
- (5) An Islamist calls for the **supremacy of Islam** in all aspects of life – social, political and economic. This is often done through *da'wa* (propagation), both to Muslims (to make them 'better' Muslims) and to non-Muslims (to convert them to Islam).

From the above five characteristics of an Islamist, one can factor in what distinguish a *classic* Islamist from the *liberal* Islamists.

**First**, a classic Islamist makes clear and outright pronouncement of his or her intent to establish an Islamic State, either through revolutionary means (such as wresting immediate power and control) or through cultural means (such as 'Islamizing' society – invariably by shaping consciousness through education and welfare works). In contrast, a liberal Islamist uses evasive means to disguise their intent of eventually establishing an Islamic State. Thus, we hear, for example, liberal Islamists calling for acceptance of the present social order in the name of pragmatism and *darurah* (emergency). Since it is suicidal to openly advocate an Islamic State in post 9-11 context, liberal Islamists suspend their ultimate goal (of an Islamic State); yet, the very thought of an Islamic State as the pinnacle of Islam's success as God's religion on earth, although dormant now, firmly binds them to the ideology of Islamism.

In addition, to use the very term *darurah* indicates that the liberal Islamist has not totally abandon the idea of an Islamic State. "Because we are in a state of *darurah*, it is no longer sinful to live and participate in a secular (even non-Muslim ruled) society," claims the liberal Islamist. This point of view will be unthinkable for the classic Islamist, who will most certainly call for *hijrah* (migration), if possible, or *jihad* (violent or non-violent) and *da'wa* for those who choose to remain in such a society, provided they do not mingle with the 'corrupting elements' of the secular, the non-Muslim and the 'unIslamic' nominal Muslims.

**Second**, while the classic Islamist openly supports the implementation of *Shari'a* laws (beyond laws governing matrimonies and inheritance), the liberal Islamists call for contextualization. For example, liberal Islamists will argue that there is no need to demand for implementation of *hudud* laws since we are living in a largely non-Muslim country (or with high percentage of non-Muslim population) and with deeply-entrenched secular environment. Yet, this very statement implies that the liberal Islamist is still a fundamentalist at heart because he or she believes that a literal imposition of certain criminal laws is undeniably essential to the Islamic totalitarian vision and completeness of Islam as a religion.

The liberal Islamist, by rejecting implementation of *hudud* laws in his immediate context (rationalizing it in various ways, such as 'society is not ready'), seems to adopt a stand similar to progressive and liberal Muslims (who firmly rejects any implementation of *hudud* laws). Yet, liberal Islamists' seemingly 'liberal' stand is merely borne out of expediency: he never truly believes that Qur'anic verses on amputations and flogging ought to be interpreted and realized in any other ways other than in a literal manner – a position that distinguishes them from progressive and liberal Muslims.

**Third**, there is a noticeable shift in the willingness on the part of liberal Islamists to engage beyond their exclusive groupings. Thus, although *usrahs* remain exclusive in nature, public activities – camps and trainings – are increasingly 'secular' in nature, less preachy and have no qualms about inviting and involving non-Muslim participations. The latter is particularly interesting. While classic Islamist trainings and camps make no pretensions on shaping participants into the 'ideal servant of God' through fear tactics and hard-selling, present-day trainings and camps by liberal Islamists are much more 'gentle' and less rigid. In fact, the non-imposition of strict segregation between male and female participants (which was unthinkable for all classic Islamists' social activities) seems to imply a more liberal attitude. Yet, these are again done out of expediency of 'winning them over through gentle persuasion', not a fundamental belief that Islam permits civil gender-relations and interactions without need for male-female segregation in public spaces (which represents progressive and liberal Muslims' position). A liberal Islamist can never abandon the idea that there is nothing inherently wrong or unIslamic for males and females to interact openly and to sit in non-segregated manner in public functions and events.

In political participation, liberal Islamists no longer call for establishment and support of Islamic political parties. Instead, there are no longer any qualms about joining and operating from within a non-Islamic party. Lately too, we see an increasing willingness to cooperate with non-Muslim institutions and agencies, even if these non-Muslim institutions and agencies are known to have been unsympathetic to Muslim cause before (and warrants condemnation under the classic Islamists' paradigm).

**Fourth**, there is a shift away from hate-mongering amongst liberal Islamists. Anti-West rhetoric is almost absent in the liberal Islamists' discourse. In a way, liberal Islamists are much more willing to learn from the West – something that will never be advocated by their predecessors. Yet, liberal Islamists can never escape from the impairing thought of an inherently atheistic and unIslamic epistemological foundation of Western knowledge and society. Thus, although liberal Islamists are more willing to study from the West, this tendency is met halfway with the opposite fundamentalist tendency to 'Islamize' whatever knowledge they received.

Despite the shift from hate-mongering not uncommon in classic Islamists' discourses, the attraction to use of clichés remain, but took a different form within the liberal Islamists. Because Islamists in general are under attack for harboring extremist ideas (particularly in their binary division of the world), the new breed of Islamists see a necessity to make a counter-claim to deny any involvement with certain extremist Islamist offshoots. Clichés like 'Islam is a religion of peace' and 'Islam rejects violence', are too easily chanted by liberal Islamists; something that is rare during the classic Islamists' ascendancy. But due to the anti-intellectualism of Islamism in general, liberal Islamists are not impelled to develop profound, coherent, cogent and systematic theological arguments for any of their slogans – they merely borrowed from the discourses of the progressive and liberal scholars and make them into convenient slogans to be used in an apologetic manner.

**Fifth**, liberal Islamists differ from classic Islamists in their style of pronouncements on Islam as a totalitarian ideology par excellence. The classic Islamist will invariably assert that 'Islam is the solution' when faced with all kinds of issues and problems besetting society. The liberal Islamist, on the other hand, is less naïve: While he or she believes that Islam provides the answer to all of humanity's problems, he or she is much more willing to put on the thinking faculty (in the name of *ijtihad*) to seek that solution. Invariably, the 'solutions' tend to indicate an amazing amalgamation of both, 'Islamic' and 'non-Islamic', sources. For example, liberal Islamists are more than willing to adopt parliamentary democracy and call it an 'Islamic form of government' than the classic Islamists who call for the reestablishment of the caliphate system with *shura* (consultative practices). Liberal Islamists are also known to have developed extremely creative 'solutions' to the problem of

establishing an Islamic State. For example, one very 'liberal solution' to the tension between accepting present secular reality and the duty of establishing an Islamic State, is to establish an "index of Islamic governance". Thus, according to the 'index', one can measure to what extent a secularly-governed country is close to becoming an 'Islamic State'. By stating, for example, a country is '70 percent Islamic', one placates the secular authority as well as pacify the Muslim public from being too demanding on their call for Islamization so as not to undo the 'healthy range' they are enjoying in a secular county. Yet, the ultimate aim of being '100 per cent Islamic State' (which must, of course, include implementation of *Shari'a* laws in totality) is the perpetual dream of the Islamist – liberal or otherwise (classic).

In the field of law, liberal Islamists do not differ from their classic counterpart – both allege that implementing 'God's laws on earth' (i.e. *Shari'a* in totality) will solve all of society's ills, from poverty to sexually-transmitted diseases. Yet, liberal Islamists will not make a de facto claim on *Shari'a* as the solution; instead, they will make an apologia that 'it is not the right time to implement *Shari'a* law', that 'it must be gradual', and that 'society is not yet ready'.

From all these, one can conclude that both – classic and liberal – Islamists feels a sense of superiority within their conception of Islam. Yet, liberal Islamists are much more subtle in their sense of superiority by garbing their speeches with seemingly 'progressive' vocabulary. One example is the concept of "cross-cultural understanding". For progressive and liberal Muslims, the phrase signifies an attempt to appreciate the similarities and differences across various cultures and religions so as to achieve greater harmonious living. For liberal Islamists, the very understanding of these similarities and differences is to devise better strategies to convince them of Islam's superiority and 'win them over to Islam' (read: conversion). In that sense, the 'liberality' of the new breed of Islamists is to serve a greater fundamentalist goal, which differs not from their classic counterparts.

### **Is the term 'Liberal Islamists' a misnomer?**

Perhaps, it will be appropriate to ask whether the term 'liberal' is accurate in describing the new breed of Islamists. I will argue positively because these Islamists display



significant liberality in many aspects of their thinking. Most apparent, they do not have a sound methodology towards interpreting aspects of their ideological beliefs that are transplanted into 'Islam'. As such, they tend to assimilate and borrow from all kinds of sources, paint it with some form of 'Islamic-ness' and advocate it as "the Islamic position..." or "the Islamic view...". This shows an amazing degree of liberality in appropriating concepts and ideas that are not properly from within the Islamic traditions and paint it as "Islamic", with no mention of the non-Muslim sources they derived from. For truly progressive and liberal Muslims, they will readily admit to 'borrowing Western concepts' that are deemed as good and useful to be assimilated or appropriated by Islam. The same honesty cannot be admitted by liberal Islamists since they start with an *a priori* position that everything garnered from the West is epistemologically 'corrupt' and 'unIslamic'.

If we were to observe, the rigidity found in classic Islamists can no longer be said to be true of the liberal Islamists. Now, liberal Islamists are more than willing to collaborate with the 'secular powers' and even don the mask of 'progressiveness' and speaks in the name of modernity, reform and universal values. These are done to (a) win back the trust of secular powers and Muslim masses (which had been affected by rise of extreme Islamism); and (b) to inch closer to the locus of influence and power so as to further the Islamist agendas. At the end of the day, the liberal Islamists' vision remains the same and they are truly fundamentalists at heart. That warrants the marriage of their recent 'liberal' mode and their deep-rooted Islamist tendencies – thus, 'liberal Islamists'.

### **Further Remarks**

From the above discussions, perhaps, it is imperative for us to make several further remarks and deductions:

First, the rise of liberal Islamists is not due to the maturation or evolution of ideological beliefs. Rather, liberal Islamists emerged out of **expediency**. Given the blow to fundamentalist visions by the increasing militancy from within the Islamist circles, the new breed of Islamists had to maneuver themselves to avoid being implicated. This account for their eagerness to dissociate themselves from many aspects of fundamentalist thought, and

their consequent similar eagerness to adopt the language of the progressivists and the liberals.

Second, despite the subtleness of the liberal Islamists' maneuverings, what is most telling of their continued presence is their **unwillingness to discuss the failings of the Islamic revivalist/resurgent movements** in their society. During the rise of Islamic revivalism in the 1980s, literatures by Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad Asad, Maryam Jameelah and Abul a'la Maududi were translated and disseminated throughout the Malay world. Today, critiques against the revivalist thinkers and the effects of fundamentalism in society were done by the progressivist circles. The silence of the liberal Islamists were indeed telling. While they are more than eager to promote progressive discourses on tolerance, pluralism and such, they are not willing to cast aside the problematic nature of fundamentalist thought brought in by their classic predecessors.

Third, the main agenda of the liberal Islamists today is to win back their 'high moral ground', especially in the aftermath of September 11. To achieve this, liberal Islamists are **fixated on playing with (any) dominant power**, particularly of the secular groups that they once declared as their enemies. The reason has been alluded to earlier: To convince the dominant secular groups that they (the liberal Islamists) are indeed the progressive ones that should be trusted and entrusted with authority to speak on and for 'moderate' Islam. Yet, when liberal Islamists are within fellow Muslim circles, they would maintain their classic authoritarian streak by obsessively differentiating the 'true Muslims' from the rest and identifying what is truly 'Islamic' and 'unIslamic'. At the same time, even though liberal Islamists would collaborate and even assist secular groups in many areas to weed out 'extremism', they will, in private, continuously denounce 'secularism', 'secularization' and 'secularists'.

The above third observation deserves greater analysis based on the latest development amongst liberal Islamists. Given the contest for the trust and investment of authority by the dominant secular powers, naturally, the liberal and progressive Muslim groups become a target for liberal Islamists. This explains why liberal Islamists are adamant on hunting down those whom they identified as proponents of "liberal Islam", even though

the very label is vague and a potent mass-based social movement is almost inexistent. By generating the idea that “liberal Islam” is ‘heretical’, ‘unrepresentative’ or simply ‘out of Islam’, liberal Islamists are able to neutralize any attempt for the authentic voices of tolerance and pluralism to be invested with authority and gain the trust of dominant secular powers in a society. At the same time, by generating fear and anxiety of the ‘threat of liberal Islam’, the masses will be more than willing to cling on to the propaganda of liberal Islamists that they are the true ‘guardians of the faith’.

What this shows is that the liberal Islamists know that the liberal and progressive Muslim groups present a threat to their efforts at winning back the heart of the masses who had been largely disillusioned by the fundamentalist vision of Islam. For the liberals and the progressivists, their call for democracy, tolerance, co-existence, equality and other progressive values has been consistent – values that were once condemned by Islamists as ‘imitative of the West’. But liberal Islamists today will freely employ and lace their speeches and writings with these terminologies because these are values that reign supreme now in a secular society. Thus, the liberal Islamists’ attack on ‘liberal Islam’ is merely a smokescreen for a bigger agenda on their plate: the issue of power and contestation of meaning, that is, ‘Who has the right to interpret Islam?’ Of course, throughout history, multiple interpretations of Islam has and will always exist. But Islamists, past and present, has always make a claim of a single, monolithic ‘Islam’ because claiming so will bolster their craving to be ‘custodians of the faith’, which will further justify their pursuit for position, power and influence in a ‘truly Islamic society’.

### **Return of Islamism?**

What we observed from above is an attempt to identify a new phenomenon that is emerging within Islamist activism. It is preliminary in nature and requires further substantiation with more concrete examples drawn from primary Islamist sources (their writings, programs and speeches) and insightful analysis on their power-play in public engagements and discourses. Nevertheless, their visibility and presence is increasingly felt within the political sphere. One must be sensitive to this presence in order to anticipate and possibly mitigate the full effects and implications should neo-Islamism burst into the scene

the way it did in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Unlike individuals, ideas do not have an expiry date and may reappear if allowed to be fermented and cultivated, unnoticed.

I submit that present-day liberal Islamists pose a danger to the present social structure if they are allowed to roam unnoticed and to be given a wide-playing field in their bid for influence and power. Liberal Islamists are more opportunistic and subtle, less principled and able to disguise or camouflage their real intent (of creating an Islamic State). Their very adoption of dominant progressive and liberal discourses seems to make them able to stealth in-between many social and political institutions without raising alarm. Because of their ability to morph effortlessly, we ought to be worried. Indeed, we ought to first unmask the ideology that is made hidden by the jargons and clichés of progressiveness they supposedly espouse. Finally, we ought to be aware and to make others aware of what their ultimate gameplan is. This will require moral courage and intellectual will to begin with. It may prove to be an uphill task, given the present situation.

\*\*\*\*\*