Muslims in Australia

Akbarzadeh, S.

Down Under

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH

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Assaults on Muslims in Australia in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks have brought the vexed issue of identity in a multicultural society to the fore. Being Muslim in Australia has not been easy, but before the recent events there was a sense among Australian Muslims that the two objects of loyalty could stand side by side. This was clearly evident among a growing number of Australian-born Muslims who knew no other homeland than Australia. That belief is now placed under enormous strain as racist attacks on Mosques and Islamic schools question the 'Australianness' of Muslims.

Muslim settlement in Australia started in earnest in the 1970s after the government of the day lifted the White Australia Policy, allowing non-Europeans to migrate to Australia. Lebanese immigrants comprised the first large Muslim community to arrive on Australian shores, fleeing the Lebanese civil war. They were followed by an influx of Iranian, Iraqi, Somali and Afghan refugees, all fleeing internal and inter-state conflict. In 1996 the census recorded a total population of Muslims in Australia at just over 201,000, or 1.1% of the total population, on par with Hindus. But the actual number is likely to have been higher as the question concerning religious affiliation was optional and many Muslims felt uncomfortable about disclosing their faith for fear of possible persecution by government agencies. The 2001 census has not yet been published, but it is estimated that the Muslim population in Australia exceeds 300,000.

Although they still constitute a very small minority, Australian Muslims have been establishing themselves in this country as permanent residents. This signifies a qualitative shift from the sporadic Muslim presence in the 19th century. Muslims' first contacts with Australia, represented by the arrival of Muslim fishers, convicts and early settlers, were too limited in scope to have any impact on Australia. Muslim presence only became permanent in the second half of the 19th century. This shift had significant implications for self-perception among Muslims.

Phases of identity-formation

It may be argued that the Muslim identity in Australia has gone through three phases. In the first phase, individual Muslims found it extremely difficult to maintain their religious identity. They were often isolated from mainstream Australian society and from their country of origin. As many Muslim men married non-Muslims, their Islamic identity was often diluted, or placed in the background. The adoption of Christian names by freed Muslim convicts and early settlers was indicative of a process of assimilation. Individual Muslims in the 19th century found it extremely difficult to exhibit their religious identity and at the same time be accepted in the larger Australian community – these appeared to be conflicting objectives. The first phase was therefore characterized by the presence of atomized Muslims and the absence of a Muslim community.

The arrival of Afghan camel drivers and the establishment of a community in 'Ghan town' signalled a shift away from atomized identity and the growth of a Muslim community. The Ghan town mosque, constructed in 1889, symbolized the growth of a permanent Muslim community in Australia, although it served a very specific ethnic group. In the early 20th century, Muslims in Australia were still few (3,908 in 1911 and 2,704 in 1947), constituting less than half a per cent of the total population. The small size, however, had significant social implications: Muslims felt the need to band together, emphasizing their commonality and downgrading their differences in order to maintain their Islamic identity and a sense of community. This constituted the second phase.

The emergence of a veritable *umma*, complete with its prayer houses and cemeteries, indicated recognition among Muslims that their existence in Australia was not transitory. They needed to make Australia home and establishing Islamic institutions was a necessary step in that direction.

The third phase of Muslim identity in Australia is characterized by the numerical growth of various ethnic groups, made possible by the revoking of the White Australia Policy. Like many other settlers, newly-arrived migrants and refugees from Muslim societies went through an adaptation phase. As pointed out by many researchers, mosques played a vital social role in this period, providing assistance to newly arrived settlers and acting as a conduit to the larger surroundings. Mosques also provided a congenial environment for socialization and rehabilitation. Iraqi women, for example, tend to treat their mosque as a social club where they can hear the latest news about family and friends, exchange cooking recipes and news of bargains in the shops. All this depends on the ability to communicate in the colloquial language. The growth of Muslim ethnic communities has given rise to the growth of ethnically oriented mosques to serve their needs. Many Muslim ethnic groups are now large enough to sustain their own mosques.

The third phase, therefore, signifies another qualitative shift in identity. Just as ethnically mixed congregations contributed to the ideal of *umma*, the growth of ethnic congregations tends to detract from it. The concept of a unified *umma*, though not rejected by Muslims, is now qualified with reference to ethnicity. This process has led to the increasing relevance of ethnic and sectarian Islam to Muslim settlers in Australia. This is in line with the growing popularity and accessibility of the community of language which serves as the pillar of the national ideal, and the fusion of religious and national identities. This nationalization of Islam has resulted in a de facto fragmentation of the ideal Muslim community.

Islamic associations

Nationalization of Islam and the consolidation of national identities among Muslims in Australia may be a dominant trend but it is not absolute. The alternative ideal of *umma* is represented by many supra-national Islamic associations. The critical question is to what extent such associations are able to mobilize and sustain a truly multi-ethnic community in Australia. The Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Muslim Community Cooperative of Australia (MCCA) present noteworthy cases for research. These, and other similar associations, purport to serve the imagined Muslim community regardless of ethnic/national divisions. However, these institutions are of different natures and their members are attracted to them for different reasons. MSAs tend to be dominated by overseas students, whose experience in Australia is fleeting and for that reason isolated. MSAs serve an important social function by providing a familiar environment for these short-term residents. The use of English in MSAs helps bridge the language gap and allows the participation of second-generation Muslims, who often feel more comfortable with English, especially at a tertiary level of discourse, than with their parents' mother-tongue. The extent of commitment to the imagined *umma* among these members, however, remains untested. It is unlikely that MSAs could operate on the same level as they do now in the absence of the energy and enthusiasm of overseas Muslim students.

The MCCA, on the other hand, is an indigenous experiment. It relies on the commitment and participation of its Australian-based founders and account-holders. The stated objective of the MCCA is to provide ethically acceptable financial services to its members, avoiding conventional banking practices which are regarded as usurious and illegitimate by Islamic scholars. This is an attractive alternative for some Muslims in Melbourne and Sydney, especially those low-income borrowers who face gruelling interviews in mainstream financial institutions. For a good number of these borrowers, the MCCA is their best chance of securing a loan. Services provided by this institution, therefore, provide tangible benefits to its members, and that is an important factor for its costumer base. The MCCA, by the mere fact of its religious operation, fosters the ideal of *umma*.

It might be a truism to say that the reality of life for Muslims in Australia is contradictory, but it bears repeating as over-generalizing analysis can easily overlook this basic factor. On an intellectual level, very few people from Muslim societies would reject the ideal of Muslim unity. At the same time, Muslims tend to gather in national frameworks because of the immediacy of that community and flow-on benefits such as Sunday language schools and celebration of festive days on the national calendar. This does not mean that they deny their Islamic heritage. The Islamic component of their identity is never far below the surface. But the Islamic component is merely that, a component, significant as it may be, of a larger national identity. It does not dwarf pride in national identity, but feeds it and by doing so detracts from the ideal of Muslim unity. For that reason it is more accurate to talk about many ethnically delineated Muslim communities in Australia, rather than a single Muslim community.

There are occasions, however, when these discrete communities are pulled together. Developments overseas may provide the stimulus for some form of Islamic cohesion. The second Gulf War (1990-91) in which Iraq was punished for invading Kuwait by Western powers under the aegis of the United Nations provided that stimulus. The plight of the Iraqi people inspired sympathy among Muslims in Australia and led to some efforts to provide them with material assistance. In more recent times, street fighting in Jerusalem and the killing of Palestinian youths gave rise to similar feelings of sympathy among Muslims in Australia, who expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian cause in street rallies in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. These expressions of unity, however, are limited, temporary and transient.

In this context, second and third generation Muslims face incongruent, sometimes conflicting, sets of loyalties. On the one hand they are brought-up by their families to feel proud of their ethnic/religious background, on the other hand they seek recognition and acceptance from their peers and the wider Australian mainstream. It is not surprising that those aspects of their parents' identity which are regarded with scepticism and bias by the Australian mainstream tend to be under-played in favour of less 'alien' characteristics. Second and third generation Muslims in Australia, therefore, tend to express their ethnic/national identity more readily than their Muslim identity. That is in conformity with the secular nature of the Australian society and the official recognition of Australia's multiculturalism.

This sense of inclusion is important for the well-being of the Australian society. It fosters commitment and social responsibility among Muslim residents, facilitating the emergence of an Australian Muslim identity. Just as historical developments have led newly arrived Turkish, Lebanese and Bosnian Muslims to value their national heritage and acknowledge the place of Islam in shaping it, policies of multiculturalism and social inclusion favour the formation of an Australian identity which acknowledges the ethnic and religious diversity of its community members. This acknowledgement facilitates the expression of Islam as a component of Australian identity, giving rise to a nascent community of Australian Muslims. Government policies are instrumental in advancing or hindering this very novel identity, where the primary point of reference is Australia. The emergence of an Australian Islam would add another layer to the already multi-layered identity of Muslim residents, complementing the ethnic points of reference among the existing Muslim communities in Australia.

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Shahram Akbarzadeh is a lecturer in politics at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. He has written extensively on Islam and nationalism in Central Asia and is currently working on Islam andglobalization.
E-mail: S.Akbarzadeh@latrobe.edu.au