

WELFARE STATE AND ISLAM: CAN PAKISTAN BE A WELFARE STATE?

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Abstract

Many Muslim scholars have upheld that the concept and practices of a modern Welfare State are Islamic. This article takes an issue with such a position. Such a notion can certainly make those Muslims happy who see no contradiction between Islam and the route of modernism taken by the modern West, but if one looks closely, this notion may be based on a poor understanding of the concept of welfare on one hand and the impact modern welfarism has had on non-Western societies on the other. This article explains the principle of welfare in Islamic sources and in the light of that principle, it appraises whether or not practices of modern welfare are permissible according to the Islamic principles. Second, it appraises efforts by some of nation-states within Muslim world (including Pakistan) to see whether, they are dedicated to the Islamic ideal or just following the path of Westernization. Third, this article revisits the notion of high consumption welfare state from an ecological point of view. Therefore, it raises questions about the legitimacy of the American dream and the possibility of the rest of the world following such a dream. Finally, the article argues that relative povertization of the filthy rich countries is better for world welfare rather than the World Bank waging a war on poverty. A change of consciousness in humanity in the light of shared spiritual principles can help us conceive a philosophically correct and contemporaneously viable concept of global welfare.

Keywords: Falah, Welfare, Welfarism, Spiritual Poverty, Global Povertization

Welfare state in the liberal West is premised upon the philosophical assumption that the welfare of the individual cannot be entrusted alone to the individual, profit seeking private corporations, or be assigned randomly to civic groups. The welfare policies across different countries came out after World War II in the West. They continue today in some form or fashion, but these policies are gradually atrophying even from the West since the early 1990s when Europe and America experienced their first

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swing to the Right since the 1960s cultural revolutions that promoted social welfarism, along with the sexual revolution, the flower children movement and so on. During this period the main concern was that the state should assume responsibility to protect people from abject poverty through unemployment benefits, medical care, free education, retirement pensions etc. The tax base was supposed to raise enough funds to pay for these needs. During this period, democracy in the West was relatively stronger and it kept a check on the modern economic system of capitalism that is ever ready to ferociously gobble up poor people's welfare. Bismarck introduced the national insurance system in Germany in 1880s which also served as a guide in Lloyd George's policies of health and unemployment in Britain in 1911, which also prompted W.H. Beveridge's coined famous term that the state should provide for the welfare of its citizens 'from cradle to grave'.¹ Even though welfare state has done very well in mitigating the pernicious effects of world capitalism, the welfare of some may still be based on destitution of others on the global level because the Western states have historically plundered the resources of nations of Asia and Africa. The global Left and various spiritual communities of the world wisdom traditions have continued to highlight this since almost a century ago.

The concept of welfare and its application is in recession now-a-days due to the current phase of world capitalism whose defenders are armed to their teeth. However, many features of the modern welfare state are still operational in Western countries from Scandinavia to New Zealand, even though these welfare practices will be further restricted to a narrower section of their societies in which marginal groups may fall through the cracks. It is this that Noam Chomsky described as the headlong 'internal third worldization' of welfare states in his famous work *Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*.² Increasingly, many welfare programs the Western countries are underfunded today. As the states gradually retract the welfare umbrella from above the heads of its citizens, people will generally fall back on families and family networks for protection. However, the very process of social change in Western societies that spawned over a couple of centuries (which consequently produced the idea of welfarism), also led to the dissolution of the family in the West. If welfare is further retracted in these

countries, and family and family values continue to recede, the outcome could be gloomy. In such a scenario, societies within the welfare states may eventually experience a tragic ending of the 'truths' of the modern era.

As far as the non-West is concerned, it is busy copying the West, and often blindly without critically evaluating the downside of modern economics and politics. The fever of development and progress remains rampant in marginal intellectuals and elite classes of the non-West, who also happen to be corrupt to the hilt and who thwart their peoples' welfare. Out of the historical non-West, East Asia is poised to beat the West at its own game, while Latin American experience is uneven when it comes to development and economic progress as prerequisites of welfare. Lastly, sub-Saharan Africa and the Muslim world are arguably the least developed of all. In both cases, hollow demagogic slogans of growth, economic progress and development by the politicians of these areas is still the same as the rest of the world, but they are a far cry from being welfare societies like the global West (Europe, North America, Southern South America, South Africa, Australia and Israel). Whereas the causes of slow progress or regression in many parts of Africa and the Muslim world may be multiple and different, they are similar in a way that many parts of these geographical zones have experienced colonial subjugation and destruction of their cultural institutions, languages and economic systems, which in turn has led to their post-independence neo-colonial subjugation.

Islamic Idea of Welfare

The idea of the welfare state as realized in the modern West after World War II remains as the goal of most nations today. However, modern democratic politicians of the Muslim world who vie to achieve an Islamic welfare state have not ceased to look to the West, even though there are equally interesting experiments being made in East Asia, particularly China.

On the level of ideas, Islam is quite capable of giving an alternative paradigm, in conjunction with other world wisdom traditions, including the possibility of resuscitating the deeply esoteric elements within the Western

Christian tradition. The fact that Muslims today do not/cannot have a West-like welfare state is not due to Islam but due to political reasons.

First, let us take a look at what the Muslim perspective of welfare is before we take this discussion any further. Quran is the foremost source of Islamic ideas which are the words of Allah. Next to that is the *Hadith* or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and after that, the historical experience and examples of the successive generation of Muslims. The concept of *falah*, betterment or welfare, is replete in the Quran, without which there would be no justice in society. This is also why the Quran has, besides other exalted titles, the title of being the *Kitab al Insaf*, the book of justice. However, we will soon find that the concept of Islamic welfare is not the same as the idea of modern welfarism of modern mass societies. Islam stresses welfare and charity. The Quran exhorts:

“The alms (zakat) are only for the poor and the needy and those who collect them, and those whose hearts are to be reconciled and to free the captives and the debtors, and for the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarers”.³

The Quran says:

“It is for Allah and His Messenger, and for the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer that it become not a commodity between the rich among you”.⁴

Although, it is neither a crime to be rich (as long as one's means and ends are noble) nor is it a crime to be poor (as long as people do not become destitute out of laziness and concupiscence of the soul), however, hoarding of wealth, its congealment into fewer hands and high income disparity among members of society is not accommodated in the Islamic tradition. Very high income differential may give rise to envy, jealousy and resentment, sentiments that destroy the human soul. The Quran encourages charitable giving in order to ensure collective welfare: *“Who has gathered wealth and counted it. He thinks that his wealth will make him last forever”*.⁵ Quran admonishes humans: *“Never will you attain righteousness unless you spend for the cause of God out of what you cherish; and whatever you spend is known to God”*.⁶ Correspondingly, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

“Allah has made zakat obligatory upon the Muslims. It is to be collected from the wealthy among you and distributed among the needy ones”.⁷ Further, he said: “The state is the guardian of anyone who has no other guardian”.⁸ As the ruler of the state of Medina, he decreed:

“When anyone dies in debt or leaves behind dependants un-provided for, the latter should come to me because I am their guardian. If anybody dies while he owes a debt and does not leave behind any property for its payment then the responsibility for its payment is mine (as head of the state). But if anyone leaves any property behind, it is for his heirs”.⁹

It is quite clear that like most of the world’s religious traditions, Islam has stressed benevolent welfare be provided by the rulers to their subjects. However, the concept of welfare is applied to needs and not the wants of people. Here, there is no distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims.¹⁰

Islam, like all religious traditions did not come into the modern age. It was revealed at a time and place, where the prevalent economic system in Arabia was a desert economy of settled and semi-nomadic bedouins. The latter, like all pre-modern economies was a need based economy, and like all other economies of the time, it was a zero-growth subsistence economy.¹¹ Within these economies, spiritual poverty is a virtue, lust and greed for riches is a vice. Legitimate pursuit of wealth is allowed nonetheless, as long as it is not for the aggrandizement of the human ego but for legitimate well-being and security of one’s family and those around us. The spiritual perspective of Islam would assert that poverty is not due to shortage of wealth, but because of abundance of desires. Quranic injunctions should not be taken as policies but principles from which policies can be derived. The application of principles to policies was rather easy in the pre-modern times, but highly political and prohibitive for Muslims today, because of the nature of the

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world in which we live today. This is so, not only for Muslims but for other religious traditions too.

Attempts to Create Islamic Welfare States

As far as the contemporary Muslim world is concerned, all Muslim states (colonized or not) aspire to be welfare states. To a certain extent, some have even realized this aspiration while most have not. The Arab Gulf states thriving on petro-dollars in subservience to the West have a higher welfare quotient, but is somehow mono-economic, artificial and focused narrowly on one nationality, be it a tiny minority of its total population. Oil rich Arab countries such as UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Qaddafi's Libya are good examples of this model. Then we have states like Turkey and Malaysia that have produced welfare for their citizens through better work ethics and enterprise. Iran wants to do the same but is badly handcuffed with sanctions.¹²

Even though, the per capita consumption may have gone up in these Arab states, they are still a far cry from the Islamic conception of welfare, because on the one hand, they have failed to produce distributive justice, and on the other, their welfare is too restricted and narrow that does not cover the marginal groups within their states. These states are no more than rentier autocracies practicing apartheid welfare. The Quranic notions of welfare are not about how much wealth is generated or how many billionaires we have amongst us; by contrast, Islamic welfare is measured by the number of people who are suffering. Not abundance of wealth, but minimization of suffering and destitution defines Islamic welfare. Hence, according to the Islamic conception of welfare, neither the West nor its Muslim imitators can qualify to be *Islamic* welfare states.

In comparison, the experience of non-Arab Muslim states is somewhat more 'natural' and home-grown with wider participation. They have managed to dole out some welfare goodies to their populations, including their minorities. While Turkey is gradually linking itself to East Asia through Central Asia and Russia in order to reap more dividends from Asian

Tigers in what seems to be an Asian century, Malaysia, on the other hand, with its substantial Chinese minority is surfing the rising East Asian tide much more directly. Parts of the Muslim world which formed the former Soviet republics of the land-locked Central Asia are still economically linked with Russia. These Central Asian states have gained independence and freedom to practice their religion but have lost the welfare umbrella (free health and education) that was there during the Soviet times. Similarly, the South Asian Muslim countries of the Indian sub-continent, that have a combined population which is the highest in the Muslim world, is mostly India-centric with large defense budgets. Such structural impediment is likely to keep them out of the league of welfare states. A good example is Pakistan.¹³

Can Pakistan Be a Welfare State?

Four years ago, Pakistan witnessed a new government that vies to establish an Islamic welfare state. The previous so-called democratic dispensation of Zardari more or less continued the economic and security policies of Musharraf era (under the American diktat), except that the Zardari-led Pakistan People's Party and government came to adopt corrupt practices grave enough to have attracted court proceedings. No doubt the people voted them out and this time around they have put their faith in more populist politicians like Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan. Both these leaders aspire to make Pakistan a progressive nation and an 'Islamic welfare state'.¹⁴ However, Panama leaks exposed Nawaz's accumulation of huge assets beyond means attracting a call for accountability. Eventually, Supreme Court of Pakistan declared him 'not to be truthful and therefore not fit enough to rule the country'. Imran Khan on the other hand has not cooperated with the Zionist elite of the West and India. This remains the secret of his popularity among masses. Also, at several occasions he has stated that he wants to make Pakistan a model welfare state. In saying so, he has not dreamt of anything different from other leaders of the Muslim world like Turkey's Erdogan or the ousted Mursi's government in Egypt. However,

their hopes of achieving the Islamic welfare state have to be analyzed further with careful insight and scrutiny, a point to which we shall return again and which may also prove to be remedial for the aim of our leaders.

It is curious to observe that over the last quarter century or so, there has been increasing assertion of Islamic identity in the Muslim world. Projects such as Islamization of knowledge, mushrooming of Islamic universities, Islamic Economics, interest-free Islamic banking, to the point that we now also have lard-free Islamic chocolate. All these efforts have been put forth by Muslims because the secular world is not about just the separation of church and state, it is also about the systematic devaluation of religion to which Muslims react. Even though the Muslim efforts to Islamize this or that have not been very successful on a large scale. The secular Muslim elite who run the state of affairs continue to remain West-oriented and their views on Islam may range from its complete relegation from public to private sphere, to open antipathy towards their own tradition. However, for the majority of people in these countries who are not rulers, but ruled, a part of their consciousness espouses awareness that they are uncomfortable with the epistemic authority of the West to cast their experience as universal for all, including the Muslims. The modern world is by and large secular and Islam insists on a unitarian paradigm that does not accept a cleavage between the sacred and the profane. Thus, while conceptualizing welfare, the modern standard (whether in the West or the Muslim world) will fall short of the Islamic standard, not because modern welfarism is not abundant enough, but perhaps because it is too abundant for some and none for the rest; and if the global per capita consumption resembled the West, it would be ecologically unsustainable. Due to this crisis, the Muslims make their assertion that only the modern welfare-state paradigm is not enough because it fulfils material needs but also skyrockets divorce and dissolution of the family.¹⁵ Hence, it is important to look after Muslims' material well-being but it is equally important to look after their moral and spiritual needs.

Also, if we followed the 'Islamization' paradigm offered by many contemporary Muslim reformers, Muslims can only have an Islamic welfare state if first they have a welfare state that can later be Islamized. Conversely, if they want to start building an Islamic welfare state from scratch, first they will need to bring about a *pax Islamica*, which overrides the old epistemic paradigms given by the West. What we see happening currently is a potential transition from *pax Americana* to *pax Sinica*, where the latter is only a culturally and politically modified version of the former. Given the bumpy historical relations between the West and the Muslim world (from crusades to colonialism), Muslims may not have the same political acrimony while working with the East Asians, however, epistemological differences on welfare will continue to remain even with East Asians if they follow the Western model of welfare.

Wealth disparity within and among nations continues to rise as a consequence of global capitalism which is armed to the teeth.

Pakistani, Turkish, or Iranian attempts to have an Islamic welfare state are neither intelligent nor originally Islamic because the modern economic systems (capitalism and communism) are not fully compatible with the Islamic principles. Communism has gone under while in capitalism, which was crucial in producing selective welfare, a few entities are making a killing and the vast majority is sinking into destitution. Wealth disparity within and among nations continues to rise as a consequence of global capitalism which is armed to the teeth. In this era of loot and plunder, the few experienced what we call the welfare state. Most never have and never will. The last sentence may seem gloomy, moribund and criminally retrogressive to the modern mind. However, in light of the biophysical limits of the globe, it may be a timely dose of reality. Those who we consider progressive are living comfortably within the bosom of welfare states because of a certain pattern of production and consumption. While production and consumption in a subsistence society leads to zero waste, in the modern society, processes of production and consumption often lead to a horrendous amount of waste.¹⁶ So much so, that today's welfare states often

ship their toxic garbage to poor third world countries through contracts signed with their illegitimate rulers in exchange for peanuts. Those who pollute are living a clean life, and those who were living rather

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parsimoniously are dwelling in toxic dirt. Since the 'third worlders' also naively expect to mimic the welfare state experiment, and in many cases the 'American dream', they would be

shocked to find that if much of the world's pattern of production, consumption and waste resembled that of the USA, one would require six more earths to act as 'sinks' to absorb the waste. It is neither possible, nor desirable, to export the American dream. In fact, the American dream has already become a global nightmare. Similarly, the European consumption pattern (who live relatively more parsimoniously than the Americans), is also not sustainable. This is exactly why the East Asian tigers who want to be in the same league as the West can be a menace for the planet. This is why in the 19th CPC congress, Chairman Xi Jinping rejected the American dream and asserted that in China we would only like to have a 'moderately prosperous' society. But does the West have any moral ground from which to reprimand the East Asians from achieving more welfare? Certainly not! Hence from an ecological point of view, the collective 'welfare' of the entire globe may lead to collective suicide of the globe.

Islamic Alternatives to Modern Welfarism: Relative Global Povertization as a Way Out

Now we return to the original point again. Like the East Asians, the Muslim leaders around the world are justified in aiming for the American welfare dream but are not cognizant of the prohibitive aspects of this dream. A slim majority in the West, however, now seems cognizant of this. With power and cognition, comes responsibility. The paradigm keepers of the West must teach their own citizens, as well as their East Asian brothers and the Muslims, that they took a wrong path and now is the time to change course. The welfare paradigm of the liberal, secular West seems too focused on wealth generation from the Islamic standards, and welfare of the

socialist bloc (like the Soviet Union) is also not acceptable; despite the fact that it may be charity; it is charity without Christ and with lesser freedom. The Islamic views on welfare may go against the World Bank economic indicators of development and welfare as absolute goods. Poverty may not be a bad thing if everyone is relatively poor. Conversely, the Western idea of more welfare may not be bad, if vast majority is recipient of riches *and* if it is ecologically sustainable.

If the modern West abandons the old paradigm of welfare and corrects its course, and most of the non-Western elite frees itself from the shackles of intellectual colonization, all may remain on the right path, the path of ecological peace and non-confrontation. If the West stays on the path it is on currently, merely an intellectual paradigm shift would not be enough to make the

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change unless this shift is accompanied by political and military weight. Unfortunately, the Western states are routinely invading the Muslim countries' resources in the name of fraudulent Global War on Terror in the quest of sustaining or fattening the American welfare, which prevents jointly collaborating and finding a way out. The latter course will retrench the Muslim world so that it seeks more defence equipment, which will require more industrialization, more production, more consumption and more waste, i.e., the old paradigm of welfarism and security. This is more bad news for the planet. The 19th and 20th century pursuit of security and well-being gave humanity a zero-sum security worldview (one's welfare is another's loss), where nations, civilizations and armies are all eyeball to eyeball, out to rip the other apart.

Islamic principles of welfare are universal, and not restricted to some alone. The collective welfare and security of the entire globe depends not on security of isolated nations, but the whole of humanity. Even if the few want to have welfare at the expense of the rest, they can only do so if we have a sustainable planet. It appears odd to Muslims to read most popular car bumper sticker in America that reads "God bless America", why not "God

bless the World”? America’s ecological future too is linked with that of the world. Gone are the days when the world was isolated. With current processes of globalization, many solutions will have to be global and not national. The challenge is to solve the problems within multiplicity of power centres instead of one totalitarian world government.

Einstein said that no solution can come from the same level of consciousness that produced the problem. With modernism in crisis, it is certain that the solutions to the problems of modernity cannot come from modernism but elsewhere. Islamic principles of welfare cannot be realized if our consciousness is not rooted in ultimate reality, which from the spiritual point of view is none other than God. Not those who have the most but those who know the most should be the leaders of the world. They have to recognize the fault of earlier paradigms and help the world change its course toward new levels of consciousness, which may have elements of the pre-modern consciousness.

It is time not to wage war against poverty, but against the looters of global wealth, so that humanity can collectively avoid abject poverty. With the current paradigm of welfare, soon no one may have any welfare.

Conclusion

Islamic principles of welfare run counter to the modern theory and practice of welfare because the latter is not rooted in any principle other than its own historical self-reference from which the West has itself departed. Nearly all the countries of the Muslim world have followed the path of westernization. This path necessitated aping the Western model of a welfare state. The welfare of the modern Western world itself rested partially on the loot and plunder of non-West, and partially on its own genius and enterprise. Western welfare state stands challenged due to its internal decline and partially because of rise of East Asia. This is gradually leading to internal ‘third worldization’ within the Western countries. At this

point in history Muslims are at a loss of a model to emulate. Since Islamic model is based on the principle of middle path and avoidance of extremes, therefore Muslims must consider welfare as avoidance of abject poverty but also the avoidance of amassment of wealth. The speeches of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah envisioned Pakistan as a socialist as well as a Muslim state, but the reason this country like many other countries could not do that is because the politics of the world system posed a prohibitive barrier against such a path. With the decline of the West, there are challenges and opportunities to conceive of a new path.

The rise of China has demonstrated that a country that is at once Communist, Socialist, Capitalist is fast becoming Confucian and Islamic, whose wealthiest person (Jack Ma) says that all private profits are also a public trust which the wealthy people should give back to the society. The Islamic path is a transcendental path which runs counter to the dichotomous modern ideological paths of a false choice between communism and capitalism, because both of these systems are eventually based on immanence that denies transcendence in name of secularism and progress. If Pakistan and the Muslim world are to avoid such excesses, they need to conceive of welfare according to current ecological realities and shift their consciousness beyond the modern Western one by resuscitating what they risk losing. They must not trade their spiritual principles with the so-called modern realities. The road to the future is the same road that comes from the past, cuts through the present, and into the future.

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- ¹ Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill & Bryan Turner, *Dictionary of Sociology*, (Penguin: Suffolk, UK, (1988): P.269.
 - ² Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many* (USA: Odonian Press, 1933)
 - ³ Al-Quran, Surah 9: Ayat 60.
 - ⁴ Ibid. Surah 59: Ayat 7.
 - ⁵ Ibid. Surah 104: Ayat 3-4.
 - ⁶ Ibid, Surah 3: Ayat 92
 - ⁷ Narrated by Abu Ma'bad, Sahih Muslim, Volume 2, Book 24, Number 573.
 - ⁸ Abu Daud in SahihTirmizi, http://www.muslimtents.com/shaufi/b16/b16_15.htm.
 - ⁹ Narrated by Abu Huraira, Sahih Bukhari, Volume 8, Book 80, Number 755.
 - ¹⁰ According to Islamic law, the Muslims pay smaller tax but are not exempted from military draft. Non-Muslims pay a slightly higher tax but are exempted from military draft.
 - ¹¹ Some examples of the pre-modern economy are feudal, prebendal, desert, nomadic and tribal economies. All of these economies stressed collective production, collective allocation and collective security without any recourse to equality but ensuring transmission of limited notion of private property understood today as usufructuary rights.
 - ¹² Intellectually, Iran Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia/Malaysia are the only places out of the Muslims who do produce critiques of the Western model, but politically they remain weak to subvert Western paradigms.
 - ¹³ Many Pakistani policy makers bemoan the fact that South Korea consulted Pakistan back in the 1960s and even 'copied' their five-year economic plans because Pakistan seemed ahead of them at that time. However, South Korea also received the protection umbrella of the US security, while Pakistan continued to be crippled under a heavy defense budget in an effort to overcome insecurity from India. And hence goes the success story of welfare in South Korea and next to none in Pakistan.
 - ¹⁴ We share with Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan the love of their nation, which according to the Islamic Tradition comes from one's *Iman* (faith), and I earnestly hope that our quest for betterment of the Pakistani nation will come from the philosophically most rigorous understanding of the global predicament. All visionary leaders must work for global welfare, of which we should be an important part.
 - ¹⁵ (Family (*ahl* or *ahila* in Arabic) means not only one's immediate or nuclear family as generally understood in the West, but the extended kin. In Islam, family is an important sanctuary whose sanctity must be preserved at all cost, because the state cannot bring up children. Arguably, the Muslim family is perhaps still the strongest in the world. However, with the pressures of modernization and secularization, it may take the sad course taken by advance industrial societies. Family is crucial for welfare, especially if the old paradigm of welfare implodes under the new global realities. The Muslims lament that the West has gone from having extended families, to nuclear family, to single parent family, to no family at all. See also Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "Family" in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic World* John Esposito, ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 458-461)
 - ¹⁶ Despite our modern prejudice against the backward subsistence societies or semi-mercantilist economies that are considered non-progressive, there is something really amazing about them from an ecological perspective: There is zero waste. There is no toxic waste. The ecological balance of earth is not perturbed.