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Is Islamic culture (Saqafat-e-Islami) the main source of religious radicalism?



Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies (AISS) published a policy paper last week and claimed that the subject of Saqafat-e-Islami (political system of Islam) in universities has caused upsurge in extremism and radicalization in Afghanistan. Their claim has raised discussions among people, especially on social media and has triggered serious criticisms of people.

Following the publication of the paper, Pojhwok New agency conducted a survey regarding its findings and asked people, whether they agree with their research or not? As a result, 10 thousand people (79%) said that the research was baseless and supported the study of Saqafat-e-Islami subject in Afghan universities.

In fact, it is not the first time for such statements about the subject. In 2016, Abdul hafiz Mansoor, an ex-Jihadi leader said in parliament that Islamic culture and mosques were the sources of terrorism. However, his statement was strongly refuted and criticized at the time.

To further discuss the issue, some questions are raised: what to create are parts of Islamic culture (Saqafat-e-Islami) are being taught at the universities studied? Why some groups attempts obstacles it teaching the subject? Does Saqafat-e-Islami truly spread radicalization? What are the objectives of the latest research published by AISS led by Dawood MuradyanHere, we discuss these issues.

Seqafat-e-Islami Subject (The study of Islamic culture)

Saqafat is Arabic term, which means “culture”. Saqafat is the collection of human society’s experiences, material and spiritual achievements. All Islamic spiritual and material values and assets are called Saqafat-e-Islami. The subject illustrates practical and faith related commands of Islam.

Afghan society has been under the invasion of foreign cultures and direct influence of their media. Given the situations, the subject is considered very essential to raise awareness about religious and Islamic cultural values among youth. This is the only subject of religious studies, which is taught alongside with other subjects in every semester.

The subject is a part of university curriculum in all public and private higher education institutions. Its aim is to teach students about Islamic worldview, the philosophy of worship, Islamic ethical political social systems and civilization. It also covers the study of modern subjects form Islamic perspective. The purpose is to familiarize students with the foundations of their religion.

The subject was included in university curriculum for the first time in 1992 during the presidency of Burhan Uddin Rabbani and was taught in first four semesters of studies. Later during Karzai time, study of Seqaat-e-Islami was extended to eight semesters by a commission of 21 members. The subject is being taught under different names in many Islamic countries of the world.

Why there is resistance against the subject

As an Islamic country, awareness about Islamic culture in Afghanistan's educational system is a basic requirement. As a Muslim, we need to organize our lives in the light of all the principles of our religion and act accordingly.

In a period of globalization, besides economic and political raids, Afghan society is also facing serious intellectual and cultural invasion. The teaching of Seqafat-e-Islami is the only way of mental and psychological protection for the Afghan youth against the foreign cultural invasion. This is the only way to keep them aware about their religious knowledge and responsibilities.

Islam is a religion of moderation and brotherhood for humanity. Islam is not only a religion, but it is the way of life, which insures human dignity, guidance to the right direction and paves the way for true civilization. Thus, besides the western criticizers, are also trying to harm the holy religion of Islam.

Those who fear from the Islamic governance and the implementation of its teaching are those, who are heavily involved in corruption and inhuman activities. That is why; they're always trying to criticize Islamic values, Islamic schools, mosques and Islamic political system.

The latest research about Seqafat-e- Islami subject

The Strategic Research Center of Afghanistan has published a study under the title of "Religious radicalism in the Higher Education of Afghanistan". In the study, the lessons from Islamic political system subject of Seqafat-e-Islami and its impact on students has been analyzed. In the study, 373 students and 8 teachers of Herat, Nangarhar and Kabul universities were interviewed

Key Findings of the study:

1. The study of Seqafat-e-Islami subject in Afghan universities has increased the religious radicalism among students.
2. 92.8% of the students believed that Islam is one of the most complete religion and thus should be obeyed by everyone.
3. 88% of the students agree with the implementation of Islamic principle called "to enjoin what is good and approved, and forbid what is evil and disapproved".
4. 84.7% of the students said that Islam is the best religion and should be taken into consideration in every aspect of life.
5. 52.1 percent of the students say that Islamic, political system is Islamic caliphate or Islamic emirates.

After reviewing the above mentioned findings, researchers concluded that extremism and radicalization in Afghan universities is increasing because of the subject. The researchers regarded above findings the signs of tremendous extremism. However, considering the findings of the research, a Muslim individual and a Muslim community cannot be accused of extremism and radicalization just because they support and obey a religion and considers it their way of life.

In the study, the students were only asked: does Islam have a political system? Should Islam be implemented? Are you accepting the principle of "to enjoin what is good and approved, and forbid what is evil and disapproved"? Do you want Islamic Caliphate or not? The answer for such question for every Muslims is naturally "yes". The answer cannot be considered extremism because it is part of Islamic religion and one cannot not blame the subject for it. These are basic questions which can be answered even by a person with little knowledge and education.

The same result would have been shocking if the study was conducted in non-Muslim world. In an Islamic country like Afghanistan however, it is neither surprising nor a matter of worry,

because it is natural that every Muslim should be pledged to obey religious principles and benefit from them in every aspect of life.

The study has not been concluded based on an academic research but it looks more like a personal pre-assumed opinion. The researchers used non-academic way to legitimize personal views in the name of the survey. However, they failed badly.

The study has accused students of extremism and radicalism based on having the following belief/opinions:

1. Belief in the implementation of the principle “to enjoin what is good and approved, and forbid what is evil and disapproved”.
2. Considering Islamic principles in all aspects of life
3. Believing Islam is the only best and true religion and can only be considered as way of life.
4. Believing in Preaching and spreading Islam and having strong commitment to Islam

Although all the above issues are parts of Islam, it is obscure that, what does their research strive to reject or approve? Even if the questions were asked from those who have not studied Saqafat-e-Islami subject in universities, the answered would still have been affirmative.

Faults in the survey conducted regarding Saqafat-e-Islami subject

The survey conducted by AISR had a number of errors and therefore it is difficult to accept the result, which discovers the connection between Saqafat-e-Islami subject and religious radicalism. Here, we illustrate a few samples of the errors:

First: the answer to the question “If Islam has a political system, then which system is Islamic?” by 45.4% of Nangarhar university students was “Emirates” and 9.3% was “Caliphate”, considering them Islamic. However, the next question: Do you think the current political system in Afghanistan is Islamic? 3.1% of questioned students at Nangarhar University said that it was not Islamic, 81.4% said that it was Islamic and 15.5% said that it was partially Islamic. Thus the question that rises is, “how is it possible that 54.7% of students at Nangarhar University consider “Emirates” and “Caliphate” as Islamic system and 81.4% of students at the same university considers the current government as an Islamic system?”

Similar issue can be witnessed in their survey of Herat University. 55.5% of students at Herat University consider “Caliphate” and “Emirates” as Islamic. At the same time, only 14.3% of students believe that the current government was non-Islamic.

Second: Poor standard of the survey uncovers further, when students are asked “If you do not consider the current government Islamic, do you demand change in the political system? If yes, which type of political system do you want?” We consider the question in the survey unstandardized based on two reasons. Firstly, majority of the students will not answer the question. Thus, a limited number of answers cannot be considered a proof or evidence, if we are

trying to accept the assumption of survey conductors that Saqafat-e-Islami subject leads to religious radicalism. Overall, the question was unanswered by 75%. The percentage of those who did not answer the question in Nangarhar and Heart universities is around 84%. Secondly, the survey is also not standard because the mentioned question contradicts the results of other questions. For instance, 8.3% students of Nangarhar University do not consider the current government as Islamic. At the same time, 55% of them consider “Emirates” and “Caliphate” as Islamic. Meanwhile, 80% of students of the same university consider the current regime Islamic. So if a person considers only "Emirate” or “caliphate” to be Islamic, how can at the same time he/she believes in the current government system as Islamic? In addition, when a person believes that the current regime is not Islamic and says that “emirate or “Caliphate” is Islamic, then why a few of them answered, when they are asked “If you do not consider the current government Islamic, do you demand change in the political system? If yes, which type of political system do you want?”

The faults in the survey of AISS is not limited to above-mentioned, but has many others and similar to the mentioned errors. Thus, we avoid their statement here.

The neglected positives of the survey

There are positive points in the survey of Afghan institute of strategic studies which unfortunately have been ignored. Some examples are:

First: Those students, who agree with the principle of “to enjoin what is good and approved, and forbid what is evil and disapproved” 38.3% and 36.5%, believe that the principle should be implemented through advice, talks and publications (newspapers, magazines, and social media).

Second: More than half of the students interviewed believe that the principle of “to enjoin what was good and approved, and forbid what was evil and disapproved” should be implemented by the government and less than half think that it should be implemented by armed and preaching groups.

Third: Although some groups argue, that the lecturer of Saqafat-e-Islami subject discuss the revival of the first political and governmental system of Islam (Caliphate), the results of the survey weakens the reasoning. The survey shows that 68% of students said that “Caliphate” has not been introduced as the best option.

Fourth: students’ acceptance and tolerance towards the presence of various groups and parties. A question in the center’s survey was: “If you do not agree with the presence of various parties, how to deal with them?” Around 80.2% of students agreed with the presence of different parties. Among those who disagreed, very few considered violence (3.2%) and propaganda (1.1%) as the solutions for the elimination of the oppositions.

Conclusion

The recent study of AISS, which was conducted in Kabul, Nangarhar and Herat universities and stated that the study of Seqafat-e-Islami subject backed-radicalization in Afghan universities is unacceptable finding. In fact, it is a way to diverge people from the main causes of extremism. The accusation of Seqafat-e-Islami as source of radicalism has more of a political and emotional aspect rather than a result of academic study.

Some criticisms on the content of subject or any modification in the content by some lecturers could be true due to personal or political tendencies. However, similar errors are also prevalent in other subjects of modern studies. However, without logical and reasoning, accusing the curriculum of the subject is nothing, but systematically planned initiative for defaming Islamic values.

Since extremism does not have a specific definition, thus, the situation has allowed everyone to define it as he/she wishes. AISS believes that loyalty to one religion is radicalism. However, the truth is, distortion and rejection of religious values of the Islamic society is the true radicalism and extremism.

The real objective of such studies apparently is to hide the roots of real terrorism and extremism. However, the radicalization is to destroy your own true religious values for the sake of other's cultural and intellectual values.

The end

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