

In the name of Allah, Most Merciful

Civic Engagement: New Perspectives

Introduction:

Civic engagement refers to the ways in which citizens participate in their community, improving conditions for others or helping to shape the community's future. Although, this term may have been used in the context of younger people, more recently, a new movement has emerged to promote greater civic engagement by older adults.¹

In this article, I explain why it is important for Muslims to understand the textual evidence underlying the concept of civic engagement, and why they should be more involved.

Meaning of Civic Engagement:

In today's socio-political environment, concern and benefit can be understood as civic involvement. The word "civic" is derived from the word "city." Hence, civic involvement refers to the meaningful ways in which a citizen is involved in the life of their city. (reference from dictionary)

And no doubt, the established homeland that the Prophet ﷺ established is the city. Hence, the new homeland was named: "Al-Madinah" which is literally means as "The City". Allah mentions in the Qur'an, "Surely, I swear by this city. And you are a resident of this city."²

In another chapter, Allah swears: "By the Fig and the Olive. And by the mount of Sinai. And by this trustworthy City."³

In both these verses, there is important reference to civic life.

Varying Islamic discourse:

Examining the Islamic text, we can see how there are many indicators of civic engagement.

1) Helping One Another

In the opening of the chapters of the Quran, Allah the Almighty instructs the believers, saying:

"And help you one another in righteousness and piety; but do not help one another in sin and transgression."⁴

This verse sets an important foundation for people: citizens and communities coming together to achieve mutual beneficial acts which favour society.

¹ Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What Do We Mean By "Civic Engagement"? *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(3), 236–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792>

² Holy Quran: The Chapter of The City. 90:1-2

³ Holy Quran: The Chapter of The Fig. 95:1-3

⁴ Holy Quran: The Chapter of The Table Spread. 5:2

There is no conjunction on with whom you should work with or help. Rather, it a generalised instruction and should be treated as such. However, the avenues for working together are clear – although general: righteousness and piety.

Using this injunction, it allows Muslims to understand that they have a duty in society; and in many cases these duties cannot be achieved when working alone, and hence there is a need to work together: to help each other to achieve higher aims.

2) Hilf al-Fudul (Covenant of Al-Fudul)

One of the key indications of the Prophet's engagement was the Covenant of al-Fudul. This covenant was signed after a harsh and difficult period in Pre-Islamic Arabia. Makkan society was recovering from the Battle of Fijar, which had strained the moral fibre of Makkan society, leaving the weak vulnerable. Arabia was very much tribal, and the strength of a person depended on his tribal affiliations. The stronger the tribe, the more prestige the individual would hold.

During these harsh times, a stranger entered Makkah hoping to sell some merchandise. A Makkan resident named Al-'Aas ibn Wa'il took the stranger's merchandise, promised to pay him; but later on refused to pay him for it.

Feeling helpless, the stranger pleaded with the people in Makkah to help him, but he received no response. The man frantically climbed atop a hill called Abu Qubais and implored the people of Makkah to assist him.

His call was answered by Az-Zubayr ibn 'Abdul Muttalib (The Prophet's uncle), who assembled the representatives of the clans of Quraish at the house of AbdUllah ibn Jad'an of Banu Taym. At the assembly the tribal leaders agreed to assist and support anyone who had suffered oppression; regardless of tribal affiliation.

As a young man, the Prophet ﷺ accompanied his uncles to witness this covenant. Years later, after he had received the revelation and began his message, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said the following about this covenant:

"I was present when a covenant was agreed upon in the house of Abdullah ibn Jad'an, and I would not accept red camels⁵ in lieu of it. Had I been asked to uphold it even in the days of Islam, I would have agreed."⁶

3) Prophet Yusuf – alaihi as salam

A great example of engagement in society on a higher⁷ level. He offered his specialist experience to the highest authority in Egypt. The story of this great messenger of Allah is documented in a whole chapter dedicated to his story. In his story, we see how Allah raises Yusuf ﷺ from out of the dungeons to the King's palace.

Despite being wrongly accused and jailed for nothing, he didn't become bitter in his attitude. Rather, when the opportunity arose, he offered his services and carried it out to the best of his abilities.

⁵ The use of this term "red camels" appears in several quotations. To the Arabs, red camels were indeed very prestigious and valuable commodities. Its usage denotes a pinnacle of riches.

⁶ Hadith: Narrated by Imam al-Bayhaqi

⁷ I use the term "higher" to denote the policy making hierarchy, not from the perspective of status or virtue.

Whilst hundreds of lessons can be drawn from his life, we can focus on three relevant to engagement:

- 1) Yusuf was blackmailed: either you accept the life that the wife of the minister had chosen for him; or he is to be jailed. Yusuf chose to resist oppression, and not to allow others to tread on his rights – even if it meant going to prison.
- 2) Yusuf offered his services to the King, despite their differing religions. The disparity of religions wasn't an excuse to remain marginalised. When the opportunity arose, he rose up to it; and actively presented himself.
- 3) The Prophet Yusuf delivered his work to the best he could do. He knows the concept of *ihsan*⁸, and practised perfection in his job, demonstrating that one shouldn't be lax in their job. He worked for the King, and carried out his job to his best ability.

4) You are the best of Nations:

Another important verse which sets the scene for civic engagement from an Islamic perspective is the following verse:

“You are the best of communities brought forth for mankind: you enjoin *ma'ruf* and you forbid *munkar*, and you believe in Allah.”⁹

Many a time, *ma'ruf* is translated as “good” and *munkar* is translated as “evil”.

However, I believe that these words have a wider definition. When we read the Quran, we find the use of the word “*ma'ruf*” being used to denote customary practice, giving the implication that *ma'ruf* is that which is customary acceptable. See verses 2:228; 231, 232, 233 and many others; in which the word *ma'ruf* is used to denote what is custom practice in matters relating to marriage, divorce, guardianship and other areas.

This is where the scholars have concluded that “Customs are references”. Indeed there is an overlap between the word custom (عرف *urf*) and goodness (*ma'ruf* معروف).

“O Mankind! We have made you nations and tribes... in order that you should do *ta'aruf*...”¹⁰

Whilst, the word *ta'aruf* can denote to “know one another”, it also means to show “display your good to one another”, a perspective I first heard from Rachid Ghannouchi (Tunisian thinker)

With the verse in chapter 3:110; Abu Su'ud says in his commentary: “This means the best people for others.”

This is a clear expression that the customary good mentioned here lies in benefit provided to the people, and by keeping away harm from the people. This is also understood from the expression, “brought forth for mankind” - namely, brought forth to benefit them and advance their best interests. And hence, the Prophet ﷺ did inform, “The best of people are those who are most beneficial to people.”¹¹

⁸ Linguistically refers to performing things to the best, or attempt for perfection

⁹ Holy Quran: The Chapter of the Family of Imran. 3:110

¹⁰ Holy Quran: The Chapter of the Apartments 49:13

¹¹ Hadith: Narrated by Imams al-Tabarani and Ibn Abil Dunya

Indeed, Allah describes a group of the people of the Book, who do just that¹².

Forbidding Munkar

The Prophet ﷺ instructs, “Whoever among you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able, then with his tongue; and if he is not able, then with his heart, and that is the weakest of faith”.¹³

In this hadith, the Prophet ﷺ was clear on instructing the Muslims how to deal with injustice.

General Principles of Civic Engagement

Justice

Justice is one the key values that Islam advocates. Indeed, Allah describes that one of the items of revelation is the scale, which denotes justice.

Justice should be the basis of Muslims’ civic engagement.

Allah says in the Qu’ran:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a better Protector to both. So follow not the lusts of your hearts, lest you may avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do.¹⁴

In another verse, Allah says:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety, and fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do.¹⁵

Protection of the weak

Muslim civic engagement must encourage protection of the weak and vulnerable in society. It is a strange paradox, that although there are abundant levels of wealth which exist in Western nations, remarkable levels of poverty also persist. In the UK today, child poverty is on the increase; more and more families are turning to food banks to support their needs; and homelessness is on the rise. Often, the elderly do not receive proper care, as a crisis in social care provision ensues.

Concerning matters such as this, the Prophet ﷺ said:

“Whoever is not merciful towards the young among us and who does not recognize the honour of the elderly among us, is not from us.”¹⁶

In a related narration, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said:

¹² Holy Quran: The Chapter of the Family of Imran. 3:114

¹³ Hadith: Narrated by Imam Muslim.

¹⁴ Holy Quran: The Chapter of The Women. 4: 135

¹⁵ Holy Quran: The Chapter of The Table Spread. 5:8

¹⁶ Hadith: Narrated by Imam al-Tirmidhi

“A person who strives to take care of the needs of the widow and the poor man is like one who strives in the way of Allah, or like one who stands during the night to pray and fasts during the day.”¹⁷

Our primary motivation for helping others should be for the love and sake of Allah, “We feed you only for the sake of Allah alone...”¹⁸

Betterment

Improving the world in which we live is an Islamic imperative.

Allah mentions the words of Shuaib U who said, “I only want betterment as much as I can; and my success lies only with Allah.”¹⁹

This was the reality of all the prophets and their righteous followers: to do what is best for society and to guide them to betterment in their lives and their hereafter.

Antidote to Islamophobia

With the ongoing Islamophobia, Muslims must rise to defend themselves and the faith they proclaim. Challenges are inevitable. However, they can be overcome if we have the desire to civically engage. The Prophet ﷺ sought the support of non-Muslims. We have no choice but to work with and build alliances with individuals and organisations who are sympathetic to our cause and are willing to stand by our side. We must have a clear agenda that addresses the challenges we face today.

It is so important to engage in society, as through civic engagement, good purposed people can ultimately change the existing narrative surrounding the ethnic minorities and dispel racist and xenophobic rhetoric.

In my upcoming article, I will discuss obstacles to civic engagement.

¹⁷ Hadith: Narrated by Imam al-Bukhari

¹⁸ Holy Quran: The Chapter of the Human. 76:9

¹⁹ Holy Quran: The Chapter of Hud. 11:88