BOOK REVIEW

REFLECTIONS ON ROY'S "THE FAILURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM"

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1. INTRODUCTION

This author is interested in Islamic management. He proposes that Islamic management is at the intersection of three disciplines – management (the mother discipline), social sciences, and Islamic studies.

He proposes the following definition:

> Islamic management seeks to help Muslim business leaders develop a corporate culture that reflects Islamic values and principles. This is not motivated by any materialistic reasons but simply by the awareness that they will eventually die. Helping their employees better understand Islam will benefit them on the Day of Judgment.

However, practitioners of Islamic management must deal with stakeholders inside and outside their organizations. In the Malaysian context, these stakeholders could be non-Muslims or Muslims who might be sceptical about the "Islamization of Malaysia" (Year, 1979; Abbott, 2010; Ong, 2014). It is suggested that it is imperative for students and practitioners of Islamic management to communicate convincingly with sceptical stakeholders in order to reassure them. Inevitably, they must know something about the social sciences to deal effectively with such questions as Muslim terrorists, the rights of non-Muslims and so forth. In this light, it seems useful for students and

practitioners of Islamic management to have read and reflected upon Olivier Roy's "The Failure of Political Islam". Roy's book will be considered in detail before presenting some reflections. The latest edition (henceforth known as "Roy, 2015") will be used as a reference. This edition includes a post-face in which Roy comments on how well his work has stood the test of time since its publication in 1992.

FIGURE 1
Islamic management
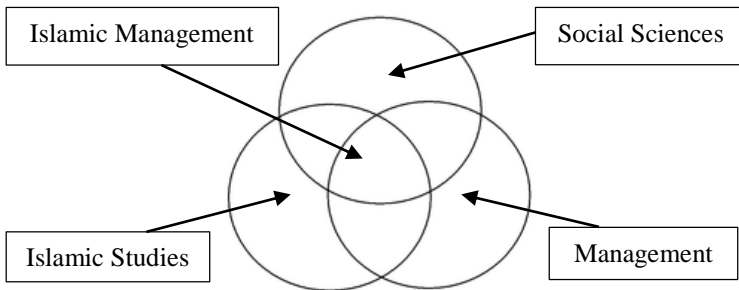
2. A SUMMARY OF ROY (2015)

Roy (2015) says that his book is not a criticism of Islam nor a discussion of the role of politics in Islam. His focus is to understand contemporary Islamist movements and exploring contextual factors. Since the 1980s, a number of Islamist movements claim to offer a political alternative to traditional political structures. Roy (2015) distinguishes between facts and aspirations. A "Muslim intellectual" is an intellectual who is Muslim. An "Islamic intellectual" is an intellectual who organises his thoughts around Islamic concepts (Roy, 2015, 8). Rather than looking at the theory of political Islam, Roy (2015) seeks to understand the sociology of Islamic groups. Roy's analysis can be broken into three parts: a historical perspective, a sociological perspective and a geostrategic perspective.

From a historical perspective, Roy (2015) notes the destructive impact that colonization had on the way Muslim societies were structured. Before colonization, Muslim scholars (the '*ulamā*) dominated the intellectual scene. They issued religious verdicts (*fatāwā*) and they worked with established political leaders to maintain the status-quo. With colonisation, both leaders and scholars lost credibility. New intellectuals (Roy (2015) calls them "Islamists") entered the picture in the 19th and 20th centuries. These Islamists were

influenced by Marxist ideology and often borrowed Marxist concepts and mixed them with Islamic sources.

These Islamists add to the complexity of the political discourse without really changing it. Roy (2015, 10) says that the thinking of Islamists can be reduced to a contradiction: political Islam is necessary for Muslims to become virtuous but such a political system can only exist if the political leaders are virtuous. Islamists are not interested in governance – creating institutions that are accountable and transparent, establishing checks and balances and so forth. The thinking of Islamists boils down to the simple belief that if Muslims are virtuous, the society will be automatically just and Islamic (Roy, 2015, 11).

Roy (2015, 11) notes that the crisis in the Muslim world is not due to political Islam. The crisis is symptomatic of most Third World countries. Militants tend to be well educated and generally come from a scientific background. They learned about political Islam not in religious institutions but in schools and universities. They were influenced by Marxism from whom they borrowed many concepts but using Arab words (Roy, 2015, 16). What started as anti-colonialism became anti-imperialism and then anti-Western. The revolutionary movements of the 1960s – Marxists, secular or nationalists – lost their dynamism and the Islamist movements replaced them (Roy, 2015, 18). Roy (2015) argues that these Islamist movements are the product of the Third World wanting to break away from Western imperialism. This leads to a complex merging of ideas that combine Islamic and various revolutionary ideologies.

Roy (2015, 22) explores the complexity of the current discourse. The discourse on modernity reflects Western values and requires Third World countries to follow the Western model if they want to be successful. Apart from criticising the lack of Western values, Third World countries have no real political alternative to offer. Yet, there is a political system in the Islamic tradition. It revolves around the *sharī'ah*, Islamic law. Whereas most laws are enacted by a state and politicians, the *sharī'ah* is independent of any authority, institution or any group of scholars. It is an unfinished project because it is constantly evolving (Roy, 2015, 25). For this reason, the totalitarian state (as it is understood in the West) is not possible in Islamic cultures. In the West, the opposite of totalitarian is freedom. In Islam, the opposite of totalitarian (*ẓulm*) is justice (Roy, 2015, 25). Roy (2015, 27) argues that Muslim scholars see Islam as "timeless, ahistorical and beyond criticism" which makes it difficult for Muslim scholars to deal with modernity.

Roy (2015) says that "political Islam" bases itself on the historical reality of the first Muslim community. This paradigm is a historical nostalgia that dominates Islamic political thought (Roy, 2015, p. 29). It rejects the practical aspects of politics (e.g. creating institutions that are transparent and accountable) and emphasises certain themes such as the non-separation of the religious and the civil, the importance of the *sharī'ah*, et cetera. In Muslim countries there are three kinds of critics: those that accept the modern state but condemn Western interference, traditional scholars and Islamists. Critics condemning the West tend to see Western conspiracies everywhere. Traditional scholars have not changed their discourse and are thus unable to address modern problems. Islamists rely on a universal discourse to criticise the state (Roy, 2015, 39). Ultimately, the Islamist discourse ignores the fundamental problem that politics cannot be based on individual virtue (Roy, 2015, 40).

From a sociological perspective, militants talk about Islam although they have not mastered the Islamic tradition. In practice, Islamist movements fall into one of two categories. Some want a revolution to take political control while others prefer a bottom-up movement of re-islamizing the society (Roy, 2015, 43). Very often Islamists alternate between these two poles. On the surface, Muslim societies are becoming more Islamic because of pressures from the top (new religious laws) and from the bottom (new popular consciousness). Below the surface, the rules of politics and business in these countries stay the same (Roy, 2015, 47).

Prior to the 19th century, the most influential intellectuals were religious scholars. They predominantly wanted to put in place the *sharī'ah* without changing the nature of the political system. Classically, the political philosophy of Islam emphasised the ethics of the ruler. The ruler gained legitimacy by defending the *sharī'ah*. These scholars were not interested in gaining power (Roy 2015, 52). Some of them refused social changes while others sought to reform society. Towards the end of the 19th century, the *salafiyya* movements appeared. These were at first led by religious scholars. By the 20th century, the religious scholars were replaced by intellectuals. In particular, three leaders – Jamaluddin Afghani, Mohammed Abduh and Rashid Rida – tried to renew the Islamic tradition by encouraging independent legal reasoning and created the *salafiyya* (Roy, 2015, 55). Apart from creating a new social awareness, politically, the *salafi* were traditional and just wanted the re-instauration of the *sharī'ah*. They undervalued the state and wished to reconstitute the *khalīfa*. Although

the *salafi* never became a political movement, they influenced later Islamist movements.

By the 1950s, the Islamists emerged. Two organisations (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jama'at i-Islami in Pakistan) had great influence. These organisations used *salafiyya* theology but they wanted Muslim countries to become Islamic. Islamist movements are generally led by Muslims that have no formal religious training but see themselves as "Islamic thinkers" (Roy, 2015, 60). They argue that "traditional scholars" have sold their loyalty to established governments and therefore that "anyone can become a scholar" (Roy, 2015, p. 60). With regards to the *sharī'ah*, they have a more flexible approach than traditional religious scholars. They look at the larger picture – society needs to change first – rather than the specific rulings. The Islamization of the state is therefore critical (Roy, 2015, 64).

To justify their ideology, Islamists propose a political interpretation of the *Qurʾān* (Roy, 2015, 65) by using words in the *Qurʾān* and giving them a modern interpretation or by inventing new expressions but attributing them to the *Qurʾān*. In some cases, new words are used to replace terms used in the *Qurʾān* (Roy, 2015, 66). For some moderate Islamists, the forces of change require a bottom-up approach. For more extreme Islamists, it requires a top-down approach, which requires a revolution. Very often, Islamists insist that the leader should have the right of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning) that puts them above the traditional scholars. With regards to the council of advisors, they are there to give advice to the leader but they have no legislative powers. In practice, this means that Islamists have given very little thought to concrete institutions that will make up the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary (Roy, 2015, 74).

With regards to the various Islamist groups, there are three broad categories. Some follow the Leninist model and tries to capture power by any means. Some take part in the democratic electoral process. The others tend to influence society by changing the Islamic identity of the people or the elite (Roy, 2015, 76). There is a constant debate between Islamists as to which approach is the best. Roy (2015) then explores the limitations of the ideology of Islamists. Apart from a few early intellectuals, there is no one who can really articulate the Islamist programme. Furthermore, the debate seems to go in circles. There can only be an Islamic society if Muslims control(s) the power and political institutions can only work well if virtuous people come to power. However, there are no institutions that can create virtuous people (Roy, 2015, 95). These contradictions are explored in detail

(Roy, 2015, 110-115) but two issues are important. First, the lack of importance according to institutions and the over-importance given to finding the perfect Muslim leader. Second, the perception that history is not really important. Apart from the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) and his four Successors, 1,400 years of history is reduced to little. To arrive at their conclusions, Islamists chose what is convenient in their history.

By the 1990s, the Islamist movement transforms itself into a neo-fundamentalist movement, less interested in taking political control but more interested in changing the society (Roy, 2015, 120). These movements try to establish pockets in which small Islamic communities can thrive in the larger, more secular, Muslim society. Typically, neo-fundamentalists are afraid of Western culture and its impacts on Muslim societies. In a neo-fundamentalist worldview, Muslims need to prove their faith by rejecting the West (Roy, 2015, 126). Currently, Islamist movements are in a state of crisis. These movements were elitist in so far as their militants had committed themselves to a political ideology. To compete in elections, these movements become more popular. This means that the majority of supporters don't really understand or care about the ideology. These movements become a collection of individuals with multiple (and sometimes contradictory) ideas and platforms for individuals to promote themselves (Roy, 2015, 128). The popularisation of these movements destroys their originality. The intellectual discourse is reduced to a minimum. Similarly, neo-fundamentalists encourage conspiracy theories in which behind every social problem, there is a Christian or Zionist plot.

Roy notes a sociological change in these movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of militants were well educated, most having a university education. By the 1980s and 1990s, fewer militants were able to enter university and most of them only have a secondary school degree. At the same time, many of these individuals pass themselves off as religious scholars (Roy, 2015, 131). They operate in spaces that are outside of government control. Their education is A mixture of secular and religious sources. There is no method, no teacher, no holistic source of knowledge – just fragments of knowledge put together to justify their ideology (Roy, 2015, 143). Much of their education boils down to a series of slogans. They reject the idea of examination and that knowledge is divided into specific disciplines that need to be mastered. Ideology is more important than knowledge (Roy, 2015, 151). He says, "with regards to *ijtihād*

(personal legal reasoning), there is no innovation, just cherry-picking". Cherry-picking – the act of choosing what is convenient in the *Qurʾān*, the *Sunnah* and the life of the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) – seems to be the defining characteristics of Islamist movements.

The last fifty pages of the book look at the geostrategic situation which is outside the scope of this research. The book was initially published in 1992 and created a lot of discussion at the time. The rise of Islamic terrorist movements and the various conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria gave the book a new sense of urgency. In 2010, the Arab spring caught most politicians and commentators by surprise. In his post-face written for the 2015 edition, Roy analyses the relevance of his book. He argues that his statements were still relevant. For example, the slogans used during the Arab spring had more to do with Muslims wanting democracy than the Islamist ideals. He argues that democracy in Muslim countries means a "pluralist understanding of Islam" (Roy, 2015, 297).

Roy's (2015) narrative is sometimes repetitive and there are many generalisations. However, four gems stand out (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Four Gems in Roy (2015)

Gems	Description
Historical perspective	Islamists mixed communist and Islamic ideology in the 19th and 20th century
Need for institutions	Politics cannot be based on individual virtue but on transparent institutions
Method	Islamists cherry-pick what is useful in Islamic and secular knowledge
Ideology	Islamists believe that ideology is more important than knowledge

Not everything that Roy (2015) wrote is necessarily accurate and much reflects his perception and opinion. For example, the statement "traditional scholars have not changed their discourse and are thus unable to address modern problems" ignores the fact that many scholars are working hard to use Islamic principles to solve modern problems. Generally, though, scholars have acknowledged Roy's contribution.

For example, Villalon (1995) notes that much scholarly writing on political Islam reinforces the stereotypes about political Islam,

echoing the claims of Islamists.   Villalon (1995) says that Roy provides a more nuanced analysis that avoids gross over-generalizations. Nafi (2015) wrote that Roy's book was published only a few years after the end of the Cold War. The triumph of the Atlantic West over the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union engendered unprecedented debate about whether this ultimate success represented the "end of history". Surprisingly that moment of triumphalism saw the rise of another kind of debate about where the next threat came from: Islam or China. Those who believed that Islam was the next enemy and that all Islamists were of one kind, viewed Roy's thesis with ambivalence. On the other hand, the book was received with some degree of disillusion by those who believed that political Islam was a force for good, and was the only political force in the Middle East capable of challenging corrupt and totalitarian rulers. Nafi (2015) argues that Roy's work shows a more complex picture. The rise of modern states, the alienation of large sections of the society, and the role of Islam in the public space has created a tension in Muslim countries. Nafi (2015) writes,

> The future and fate of political Islam is, and will continue to be, connected with these grand issues of modern Muslim societies, and not necessarily with the current and rapidly changing political situation.

However, it is useful to reflect on how this book can benefit Muslim students of management and Muslim practitioners of Islamic management.

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS

After reading Roy (2015), the author reflected on the contentious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. This does not have to be as the life of the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) shows. For example, a trader from Yemen had been cheated in a business transaction. He complained publicly and appealed to the honour and dignity of the Quraysh to give him justice. Abdullah ibn Judan invited all the chiefs of tribes and clans and they all pledge to intervene in any conflict and always side with the oppressed. This alliance was known as *ḥilf al-fuḍūl* (the Pact of the Virtuous). Later, after Muhammad (peace be upon him) became a prophet, he told his companions, "I was

present in Abdullah ibn Judan's house when a pact was concluded, so excellent that I would not exchange my part for it even for a herd of red camels, and if now, in Islam, I was asked to take part in it, I would be glad to accept" (Ramadan, 2007, 21). Ramadan (2007, 21) writes, "He acknowledges a pact that was made before the beginning of Revelation and in which he pledges to defend justice imperatively and to oppose the oppression of the destitute and the powerless." By doing so, the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) acknowledged that the pursuit of justice is of upmost importance. He established the validity of a pact established by non-Muslims seeking justice for the common good of the society (Ramadan, 2007, 21). Ramadan (2007, 21) concludes, "He clearly acknowledges the validity of adhering to principles of justice and defending the oppressed, regardless of whether these principles come from inside Islam or outside it."

To go to Madinah, the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) and Abu Bakr hired a non-Muslim guide, Abdullah ibn Urayqat. Ramadan (2007) concluded that "he established his relationships in the name of trust and the respect of principles and not exclusively on the basis of similar religious affiliation. His Companions had understood this as well and they did not hesitate to develop solid ties with non-Muslims in the name of kinship or friendship, on the basis of mutual respect and trust, even in perilous situations" (Ramadan, 2007, 76).

The *Qur'ān* makes it clear that standing up for justice is part of faith. The Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) demonstrated this in many ways. In one incident, a Muslim stole and blamed a Jew. The evidence for the case was clear and the Muslim was guilty (Ramadan, 2007, 90). However, the tribe came out to support the wrongdoer by using religion as an excuse. Allah revealed that such an attitude is unacceptable (4:105-113). Allah is very concise in the *Qur'ān*. The fact that eight *āyat* were revealed about this incident reveals how hateful blaming innocent people (whether Muslims or non-Muslim) is in the sight of Allah. Having liberated Mecca, there was a possibility that Muslims would seek revenge against selected non-Muslims who had harmed them during the Meccan period. Allah says:

> "O you who have believed, do not violate the rites of Allah or the sacred month or the sacrificial animals and garlanding [them] or [violate the safety of] those coming to the Sacred House seeking bounty from their Lord and [His] approval. But when you come out of ihram, then

[you may] hunt. And do not let the hatred of a people for having obstructed you from al-Masjid al-Haram lead you to transgress. And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty. (*Qurʾān*, 5: 2)

In this *āyah*, Allah clearly instructs Muslims not to cooperate with one another to harm non-Muslims. This is part of *taqwā*.

These incidences from the life of the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) and *āyat* in the *Qur'ān* suggest that maintaining relationships with non-Muslims based on justice and respect is desired in Islam. However, it requires students and practitioners of Islamic management to think deeply and communicate effectively with non-Muslims.

4. BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

This discussion has its roots in a meeting that was held with fellow colleagues in 2014. We were tasked with devising the curriculum for the Islamic Banking and Finance industry in Malaysia. The discussion centred on two views of management:

a.   Management students should have a narrow view. They should focus only on management, marketing, and accounting subjects.
b.   Management students should have a broader view. Apart from management, marketing, and accounting, they should also understand how society works. By studying the social science topics in detail, they gain insights into history, political science, and philosophy.

If one takes the first perspective, there is no benefit to reading this book as it falls outside the subjects that management students ought to know. If one takes the second perspective, reading this book has many benefits. It provides a historical and sociological view of Islamist movements and it asks some very tough and thought-provoking questions. It raises many questions that are relevant to the current political situation in Malaysia and gives students the opportunity to think about these questions before they vote. It is not an easy book to read for Muslims because it requires readers to be open to criticism and remain critical at the same time. The author believes that reading this book will be of benefit to Muslim management students but it would be necessary to think carefully in

which part of the course it could be introduced and how lecturers could help students relate the content of the book to their studies.

5. BENEFITS FOR PRACTITIONERS OF ISLAMIC MANAGEMENT

The end goal of Islamic management is to create organisations whose corporate culture reflects Islamic values (Fontaine, Ahmad, and Oziev, 2017). This requires that Muslim business leaders communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders.

Internally, Muslim business leaders must be very clear about what they want and what they don't want. Although it is easy to use slogans such as "we want to follow the Qur'an and the Sunnah," such statements are quite vague. After reading this book, business leaders ought to be aware that there are basic options offered to them. One option is to follow the principles of the Islamic tradition but making it relevant to the 21st century. This can be done quite easily by referring to the *maqasid al-sharī'ah* and Islamic legal maxims (Fontaine et al., 2017). The second option is to pick and choose whatever is convenient in the Islamic tradition and ignore anything that is inconvenient.

Externally, Muslim business leaders must communicate with stakeholders that might be sceptical about the Islamic management agenda. Vague statements such as "Islam is a peaceful religion" are not enough to relieve the anxiety of such stakeholders. After reading this book though, it is possible to offer a short review of political Islam. This review could highlight that many Islamist movements have distorted the Islamic tradition by mixing it with communist ideology. However, as Roy (2015) indicated in his book, the trend of the majority of Muslims is to aspire to democratic ideals while allowing Islamic in the public space. In the same manner, Islamic management is not meant to be exclusive as many Islamic values are shared by everyone. However, certain concerns are unique to Muslims and need to be negotiated with non-Muslims and sceptical Muslims. Putting it another way, Islamic management seeks to create organisations that do not alienate Muslims and non-Muslims. The aim is not the Islamization of Malaysia but to find ways to help Muslims at work to become more spiritual. However, before one can communicate effectively, one must first understand the issues clearly and this book does provide many useful insights.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Roy (2015) has done an excellent job in explaining the history and the sociology of Islamist movements. It is still a difficult book to read for Muslim readers because it hits so close to home. However, if one accepts its limitations – such as its blanket criticisms of Muslim scholars – as being errors of perception, there is still much to benefit from. It provides readers with historical facts, context, and insights into very complex dynamics. It also provides many springboards for future readings. For example, a careful study of the life of the Prophet (*ṣal-Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) – such as the one by Ramadan (2007) – helps put some of Roy's comments into perspective. Although it is not directly related to Islamic management, it is argued that students and practitioners of Islamic management must know more than their narrow domains and that Roy (2015) should be part of their reading.

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