Forging Muslim and Non-Muslim Relationship: Contesting the Doctrine of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'*

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Synopsis

The doctrine of Al-Wala' wal Bara' which is central to the ideology of modern Salafism poses challenges to Muslim and non-Muslim relationship and integration. A nuance and "sophisticated" understanding of the concept is critical to guide the direction of this integration.

Commentary

THE CONCEPT of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* as portrayed in modern Salafism poses great challenges to the realities of modern living. This is so especially in the context where Muslims are living as minority communities in non-Muslim countries. What is the valid and appropriate attitude of Muslims to relationships with non-Muslims?

A major source of confusion and controversy with regards to this relationship comes from the allegation that Muslims must reserve their love and loyalty for fellow Muslims and to reject and declare war on the rest of humanity. This idea and allegation can most acutely be seen through the Islamic concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* (Loyalty and Disavowal), which appears as central to the ideology of modern Salafism.

What is Al-Wala' wal Bara?

Modern Salafis argue that the concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is an important shield and tool for the Muslims to face the challenges of modernism in the current world. This is so as Muslims are struggling to maintain Islam's authenticity and legitimacy amidst an onslaught of foreign values and belief systems as a result of conquests, colonisations and the current wave of globalisation.

Understanding modern Salafi conceptions of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is an urgent priority in the lives of Muslims today. This understanding is critical, as Muslims increasingly live as minority communities across the globe and the concept has specific implications for whether (and how) Muslims can live harmoniously with non-Muslims. The consequences of applying the modern Salafi concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* are serious – it promotes a way of life that is insular and hostile towards non-Muslims and this, it might be argued, is at variance with the more tolerant, inclusive nature of Islam.

In its most fundamental definition, the concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* prescribes the relationship Muslims are enjoined to have with God and their fellow human beings. The term *wala'* refers to the undivided loyalty Muslims should portray to God, Islam and their Muslim co-religionists over all other things, while *bara'* refers to the disavowal of anything deemed un-Islamic.

Fundamentally, Al-Wala' wal Bara' in modern Salafism describes the posture Muslims should take in their relationship with non-Muslims, their cultures, systems and environments. Sometimes, modern Salafis consider cultures which one might normally view as Islamic to be "un-Islamic" since they have "deviated" from the practice of the Prophet and the *salaf al-salih* (the pious predecessors or early Muslims).

The four dimensions of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'*

The concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* in modern Salafism has four dimensions namely (1) creedal (*aqidah*); (2) social; (3) political; and (4) *Jihadi* (which literally means struggle or fighting). Generally, all Salafis agree on the concept of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* at the *aqidah* level. They claim Muslims must believe and uphold the concept as it is connected to the faith. Also at the *aqidah* level, they claim that *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is important to fight any religious innovations or *bid'ah* that has crept into the religion.

However, they differ in the application of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* at the social and political level. At the social level, *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is characterised by a portrayal of non-Muslims as potential enemies, and un-Islamic practices as dangerous acts that could threaten the purity of Islam and *tawhid* (monotheism). Examples of this dimension include giving and accepting gifts from the non-Muslims, joining them in their religious festivals and even using the non-*hijri* calendar which according to some Salafis constitutes *al-tashabbuh bil kuffar* (imitation of the non-Muslims).

As for the use of the concept by those who actively incorporate elements of politics into their belief some Salafis assert that Muslims must give their loyalty only to Muslim rulers who rule according to the Islamic system or the *shariah* (Islamic law). Muslim rulers who do not rule with the *shariah* must be disavowed, and Muslims must abandon any un-Islamic political system such as democracy, nationalism and secularism, just as they are required to perform *bara'* of the non-Muslims.

In its political form, *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is linked to the concept of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* (the unity of governance), in which a Muslim leader who does not rule by the *shariah*

in its entirety is an infidel who should be overthrown, by violent means if necessary. The political dimension of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* can lead to the *Jihadi* dimension.

Salafis who apply this role of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* usually incorporate the practice of *takfir* (ex-communication of Muslims) especially to Muslim rulers who do not implement *shariah* or, who apply any non-Islamic political systems which are seen by some Salafis as against Islamic teachings. The act of *takfir* will eventually lead to *jihad* which is commonly manifested in the form of overthrowing and attacking them.

Contesting the doctrine of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'*

Practising the modern Salafis' version of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* could be a barrier to integration between different ethnic and religious groups, and develop intolerance amongst them. At worst, the concept could be the foundational basis for the very extreme Salafis to incite hatred and legitimise violence against the unbelieving majority.

Due to these effects and consequences of applying the modern Salafis' version of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'*, the so-called mainstream Muslims or non-Salafi Muslims have made attempts to challenge the modern Salafis and prove that their understanding of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* is incorrect and inappropriate especially in the context of modern living.

As a divine code of conduct, the consequences of applying modern Salafis' version of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* are serious – arguably it promotes a life that is insular and hostile towards non-Muslims. As such, there is a need to reach a legitimate meaning and position of the principles of *Al-Wala' wal Bara'* as it applies to contemporary Islam in light of the primary Islamic sources.

In this globalised world, many Muslims feel that their key beliefs are challenged and their identity is threatened. As a result, Muslims are searching for signposts and guidelines to practice Islam in a world seemingly at odds with Islamic principles. A "sophisticated" understanding of the concept is seen as critical to guide the direction of integration and is crucial to assist Muslims to confidently lead good lives wherever they may be.

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