Identity, Social and Economic Issues of Muslim Minorities in Russia

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to define the term “minority” and issues of minority in modern state. Generally the term “minority” is defined mainly based on numerical, and defining the term “minority” is one of the most widely debated and till-date it has not been able to come up with a conclusive or universally accepted definition. Modern state, which is a liberal state is multicultural society with has its own fabrics of diverseness and uniqueness. Liberal state draws its energy of creativity and the idea of progressive society from its own trends of diversity prevailing in the society. Every modern society consist of minorities, where the claims and demands of one group began to clash with other minority or majority which can flares the conflict further and deteriorate the tranquility of a society. Thus, the state which safeguards the rights and interest of a society has to made some positive provisions or constitutional arrangement to safeguard the interest of minorities. So, it is mandatory for any state to protect the rights of minorities, so that the identity of minorities are well kept intact and they do not remain backward socially and economically. Also it is to be seen that the minorities are not assimilated into the larger or majority of a society against their will.

Keywords: Minority, State, Assimilation, Multicultural Society, Muslim, Identity, Social and Economic issues.

Introduction

There is no universally accepted definition of a minority. The definition of a minority is one of the most widely debated and controversial topics in the social science. Generally, the term “minority” is used to refer to a particular group that is not only numerically smaller than the majority, or the nation, but also alienated from enjoying the social, political, and economic benefits enjoyed by the majority. According to the United Nations Report, minorities are based upon national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity. In every state, there is an existence of one or more minority groups within their national territories, characterized by their own national, ethnic, linguistic or religious identity and it really differs from the majority or the dominant group of a state. According to Gurr and Scarritt (1989) “minorities are groups within larger politically-organized societies whose members share a distinctive collective identity based on cultural and ascriptive traits recognized by them and by the larger society. There are many possible bases for separate group identity: common historical experiences, religious beliefs, language, ethnicity, region of residence and in caste-like systems, traditionally prescribed occupations”.

According to Brubaker (1995), national minority is not something that is given by the facts of ethnic demography. It is a dynamic political stance, or, more precisely, a family of related yet mutually competing stances, not a static ethnodemographic condition. Three elements are characteristic of this political stance, or family of stances: 1) the public claim to membership of an ethnocultural nation different from the numerically or politically dominant ethnocultural nation; 2) the demand for state recognition of this distinct ethnocultural nationality; and 3) the assertion, on the basis of this ethnocultural nationality, of certain collective cultural and/or political rights nationality, of certain collective cultural and/or political rights. But as there is no conclusive definition of minority neither it is not laid down by any international law, so Gilbert (1996) says that International Law has not laid down a conclusive definition of minority, but the author used French sociologist Collette Guillaumni’s approach which recognizes the relativity of the term “minority”, non-dominant majorities which also could well be granted such status of minority. Even Gurr and Scarritt (1989) has pointed out that the term “minority” is misnomer as minority is not always numerically smaller in some state or society, like for instance the blacks in South Africa and Shiites in Sunni-rulled Iraq where they are the majority. Thus, to qualify the status of minority it cannot be based only on a particular group which is numerically smaller than the rest of the population.
The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 led to the creation of a new Russia, but this new Russia is not a nation-state rather it is a multiethnic, multi-religious and multicultural state. Like in any other multicultural state Russia faced the problems and challenges from its cultural diversity. Historically, the predominant religion in Russia is Russian Orthodox. Christianity had come to Russia from Constantinople, the seat of the Eastern Church and the Byzantine Empire. Russian Orthodox Church accounts for over half of the total number registered in Russia and it has nearly 5000 religious associations. Muslims are the biggest religious minority among the religious minorities in Russia, with a population of 20 million and it has 3000 religious associations. Islam is one of Russia’s traditional religions and its history in its territory is comparable with that of Russian Orthodox.

Identity Issues

With the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the state has given the privileged status to the Russian Orthodox Church, and Muslim which had played the vital role along with the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping the nationhood and retaining the culture of the Soviet Union has been relegated to the largest religious minority in Russia. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has led to a tremendous increase in the population of the Muslims and incessantly it has been expanding it near and far. As the State is inclined more towards the Russian Orthodox, and with the increasing population of the Muslims the consciousness and awareness in the realm of its religion, culture and politics has achieved a new level in Russian Federation. According to Malashenko (2009) and Hunter (2004) it would be difficult to determine the exact number of Muslim citizens or to be considered as a Muslim, as it has to be seen who follows the religious rites strictly and no conclusive official statistics on the number of Muslims has been given. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the policies of the state and its approaches changed. The predominant Russian Orthodox Church became an important part of the state, where the state granted the privileged status, and became an integral part of the state. Muslim became the largest religious minorities and along with other religious minorities, the treatment of the state towards them were shaped and modelled based on the Orthodox-state engagement, but most of the time the main priority is being given to the Russian Orthodox (Braginskaia 2012).

The state engagement and concern with the Muslim is that with their different geographical location their customs and traditions vary. As pointed out by Malashenko and Nuritvo (2009), the Muslim population in the Russian Federation is not a homogeneous society but rather it is multiethnic and multicultural society. There are significant differences between Muslim communities in the Volga region and the Muslim communities in the North Caucasus. The Muslims were seen through the prism of hostility by the Russian as the seeds of hostility were sown during the invasions by the Mongols, which had a great attachment with Islam. Thus the Muslims were driven to remain subordinate religion to the Russian Orthodox which really undermines the role that they had contributed in shaping and retaining the culture of Russia along with the Russian Orthodox. All these feeling of hostilities of Russian towards the Muslim have been sown since the Soviets were invaded by the Muslims and then until the Bolsheviks revolution the sense of Russian identity was identified based on religion, and that is the Orthodoxy Christianity. The question of Russian national idea is not conceivable without religion, as inclusion of religion certainly dominates in any execution of policies and in which the society of Russia cannot be straighten with a civilizational consensus, where the inclusions of religion, Russian Orthodox Church became inevitable in asserting the national idea of Russia as inclusion of Orthodoxy Christianity legitimize the change of institutions and power (Agadjanian 2001). The Chechen Conflict and notably the terrorist attacks within Russia enhance more to develop a single religious society. The terrorist attack in the Russia heartland further increased the hostility towards the Muslims which became a great concern for the Russia’s security and identity. The incidence of terrorism began to increase incessantly from the outset of the first Chechen War and it gained more momentum in its terrorist attack during the leadership of Putin. As the poor social conditions in the North Caucasus region has contributed to the rise of radicalization of Islam, and further it was influenced by radical Islamic organization from abroad has significantly led to rise of radical Islam in Chechnya. The identity crisis of the Muslim in Russia is related to the set of relationship with the Russian state and society and on the other hand as the Muslims communities is not a homogenous society and therefore different Muslims minority community has to be dealt differently who are deeply entrenched on the issues on nationalism, separate statehood, like, to secede it away from the Russian Federation, Chechnya case (Hunter 2004).

The crisis of Muslims identity in Russian Federation is not only because of the failure of the state, where the state has discriminated and prosecuted the Muslims. The diversity prevailed
within the Muslim communities became a big hurdle and issues for the identity of the Muslims. As Malashenko and Nuritova (2009) pointed out that the Russian Muslim population is multiethnic and multicultural, instead of one united Muslim society in Russia, where the imams of 'Tatar don not enjoy the authority like the imams in the North Caucasus and Muslim clergyman in North Caucasus do not speak in Tatar mosques, and their religious solidarity is very limited as it was proven by the first and second war of Chechnya. The problems that the Muslims in Russia are facing in their identity issue is not only with the relation with the Russian state and the society, but within the Muslim community itself as there is a big stratification on the basis of their religious rituals, practices and their lack of organizational unity. The prevailing disunity within the Muslim community, instead of forming one united Muslim community they began to have their own set of interest and principles. Their relations eventually differ with the state, and it was made obvious with the outcome of the Chechen war. The disunity within the Muslims only embraces the feeling of hatred, hostility, and discrimination from the state, where the state began to ignore the demands of the Muslims and they are left neglected. It is true to say that injustice and violence can transform any organization or community into an extremist (Warhola and Lehning, 2007). With the outbreak of the Chechen war the seed of anti-Muslim was conceived. The state tends to see Muslims with the gesture of suspect and hostility, and some politician began to play the cards of gaining their vote without taking much painstaking into their real grievances and resentments.

The Russian state tends to see Muslims as the ‘Other’, where Anna Triadafyllidou says “significant others are other nations or states that influence the development of an in-group’s identity by means of their threatening presence” (Teper and Course, 2014). These terrorist activities of the Muslim become a threat for the Russian state and the Society, and they began to develop a feeling of nationalism much stronger and attached the idea of national identity only on citizens who follows Orthodox Christianity and considered the Muslim as a threat. In most cases the Muslims do not want to separate from the Russian state, but the tension within the Muslim societies, between the ethnic and religious pole, and the dichotomy that had emerged among Russia’s Muslims, between Islam and an ethnocentric and largely pre-Islamic concept of identity has created a juncture where their identity is at great risk.

Social and Economic Issues

The conquest of the Central Asia and other parts of Muslims dominated region was an important step for the Russian as it enhances the geopolitics, economy and political power. With the conquest of Kazan Khanate in 1552, the Russian began to establish their dominancy over Central Asia and Muslim dominated region. The conquest made by the Russian not only dominated these regions but it was attached with more than their dominancy and controlling the rein of socioeconomic and political power. The Russian set up their empire and began to assert their social culture values upon them. Concisely, it can be said that the culture, customs and other social values of the Muslims were distorted by the Russian as the Muslims were considered backward, primitive and their rigid Islam doctrines were required to be modernized by the Russian. Thus the Russian considered the Muslims need to be civilized as their social and cultural values were not compatible into the so called ‘modern world’.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in contemporary Russia, the Orthodox Church has gained a tremendous power in the administration of the state, though according to the 1993 constitution it declared as a secular state, and 1997 law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” in its preamble the special contribution of the Russian Orthodox in Russian history has been acknowledged (Hunter, 2004). The whole idea of nationalism emerged upon the presence of other religion which they considered as a threat in which it further enhanced the feeling of nationalism by embracing and inclined more towards one’s religion doctrines and principle, and thus it was further reinforced by their action in conquering and converting them. The feeling of nationalism tends to be felt drastically or more intensely by the presence of Muslims, as historical events and legacies which has unfolded the enmity between Russian and Muslims and among all other religious minorities, the policies of the state on religion which negates the whole idea of justice and equality had a great negative impact on Muslims socially and economically.

The increasing population of Muslims in Russia become a great concern for the Russian state as the birthrate of the Orthodox has been declining and it has been estimated that by 2030, the population of the Muslims can go up to 30 million (Hunter 2004). Also the migration of Muslims into the capital mainly from the Central Asia and as the Muslims are diverse in their cultural practices, religious beliefs and traditions the state has to engage them...
based on their geographical location. It became a concern for the state as the Muslim immigrant into the capital are associated with the issues of minority and to whom they are to be associated (Braginskia, 2012). Moreover on the issues of immigrants Medvedev and Putin acknowledged some of the reproaches against the immigrants on non-compliance with Russian laws and customs, Putin reiterated by suggesting to tighten the immigration policies further (Teper and Course 2014). As the Russian state engagement with the Muslim society is based on their geographical location and their political culture, the main concern for the Russian state in engaging with the Muslims communities is in the North Caucasus. Muslims in the North Caucasus unlike in Tatarstan are rebellious, defiance to the policies of the state and presence of strong Islamic nationalist movement which become a great threat to the security and sovereignty of the Russian state. The gigantic geography of Russia magnified the differences of any same religion or society residing in different parts of Russian Federation. Muslims in Russian Federation live in diverse ethnic groups, but their diverseness is unified on the basis of religion and their Islamic identity and thus the politics of identity has come to the fore.

The historical events of controlling the Muslims socially, economically and politically had continued during the period of the Soviet and it is still apparent in modern Russia. It has been said that the poor socioeconomic conditions in the Caucasus region which has been neglected by the state can be considered as one of the reason for the rise of radical Islam in Russia. As the state did not pay any heed to the resentment and agitation for their poor economic conditions and as an alternative to the state the Muslims seek help and financial aid from other Muslim countries further fueled the Islamic movement and at the same time it deteriorated their relationship with the Russian state further. The North Caucasian Republics suffers from acute poor socio-economic condition at an alarming level. The poor socioeconomic condition of North Caucasus region is the poorest in Russian Federation. The unemployed population is at an alarming level, infant mortality rate is very high and most of them are illiterate. Per capita income of this region is only two third of the national average. Ingushetia is the poorest and most backward region in Russian Federation (Gidadhubli 2004). Historically, Muslims population in Russian Federation have been fighting for a greater autonomy, self-determination, cultural and religious freedom instead of being integrated or assimilated into the Russian culture and society (Hunter 2004). Moreover, during the period of Putin and Medvedev the state like during the Soviet period followed semi-authoritarian principle of distribution of power. During Putin-Medvedev period, their approaches toward Muslims were made on the basis of integrating the Muslim communities into the framework of the political structure and framework. In one way their highly centralized policies have been successful in distributing the economic resources in Russian Federations for a particular period but, as it was highly centralized it became an impediment for other religious communities. Diversities and disunity among the Russian Muslims are being acknowledged by the state in which the state tends to ignore and began to neglect the Muslim communities socially, politically and economically. The state tends to take advantage and changed their approaches by tolerating all the activities of Islam, it further feigned to promote their religious institution by giving financial aid to one section of the Muslim communities and ignoring the others. The main intention of the state was to fix the Muslim communities into the political framework of the state by granting financial aid to act as a means for repressive measures towards any nationalist or Islamist militants. The main concern for the Russian security and integrity became apparent with the war with Chechnya in 1991-92, when Chechen tries to secede it away from Russia and Tatarstan refusal sign the treaty attributed its deteriorated the relation between the state and Muslims. Also this hostility against the Muslims made Russia to considered Russian Orthodox as the religion of the State (Glinski-Vassiliev 2001). Russia thus gave the privileged status to the Russian Orthodox Church and began to ignore, condemn and neglect the Muslims community in different social aspects. Economically, on comparison to the other religions in Russia Muslims in Russian Federation are less privilege people. The poverty rate in the North Caucasus is much lower than the average of Russia and the level of income is lower than the half of Russia. The percentage of population living under the poverty line is highest in Ingushetia, followed by Dagestan and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. The economic disaster in this region has been contributed by the rule of the Soviet in which the economic disparity began to become bigger, the discriminated policies of the state, and the effects of the Chechen war has made the socioeconomic development stagnant. Among the republics of Russia, comparatively Tatarstan and Bashkortostan have better average income as they are geographically located in a better area of Volga-Ural region and they have been exposed to rich mineral resources. The most affected region in Russian Federation is the North Caucasus region due to the separatist movement to secede away
from Russia. The acute poverty in this region is because of its geopolitics which had contributed to the mass unemployment and poverty.

**Conclusion**

All these anti-Muslims provisions and the hostility relation between the state and Muslims made the state to attach religion as the national identity, in which Russian Orthodox religion was given the highest priority and considered as the religion of the state. Also Russian state follows highly centralized policies to control and regulate the nationalist movement and any Islamic militant formation in Russian Federation. It has to be said that the state not only failed Muslims by ignoring or neglecting the Muslim communities, but within the Muslim communities there is no unity as they are widely scattered and there is difference among the Muslims leaders in their views and approaches, which is apparent that Muslims identity, social and economic status are at great risk.

**References**