

Opinion – Muslims as Sufferers in the Liberal World Order

Written by Shafi Md Mostofa

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SHAFI MD MOSTOFA, APR 24 2025

When Francis Fukuyama wrote *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992, he suggested that humanity had reached the pinnacle of political and social evolution under the liberal democratic order led by the United States. This order promised freedom, equality, and the protection of fundamental rights for all. But while Fukuyama's thesis appeared to celebrate the end of ideological struggle, Samuel Huntington proposed a more skeptical view in his *Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington argued that the West would increasingly view Islam as a threat, foreseeing cultural clashes rather than harmonious coexistence. This dichotomy between Islam and the West has manifested in a reality that contradicts the ideals of liberalism, especially for Muslim communities worldwide. The "liberal world order" that promised freedom and equality has paradoxically become a source of suffering and marginalization for Muslims across the globe.

One of the core tenets of liberal democracy is secularism, meant to ensure freedom of belief and protect religious diversity. Yet, for Muslims, secularism has often translated into restrictions rather than freedom. In France, for example, the concept of *laïcité*, or strict secularism, has been used to justify bans on religious symbols, including the hijab, in public spaces. These policies disproportionately target Muslim women, restricting their right to express their faith and forcing them to choose between religious expression and public participation. This approach starkly contradicts the liberal democratic ideal of freedom of expression and has provoked feelings of exclusion and alienation among Muslims.

The impact of secularism on Muslims is not confined to Western countries. In India, the world's largest democracy, secularism has been used to sideline Muslim identity and justify policies that disadvantage Muslim communities. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, Muslims in India have faced increasing marginalization, from restrictions on religious practices to violent attacks by Hindu nationalist groups. The situation is even more dire in Kashmir, where government policies and military occupation have stifled the religious and political freedoms of Kashmiri Muslims. Secularism, in these cases, appears not as a guarantee of freedom but as a tool for the suppression of minority faiths, particularly Islam.

Muslim-majority countries have not been immune to these trends. In Bangladesh, for instance, secularism has been used as a political tool to curb Islamic political expression. Under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, policies limiting religious attire and activities deemed "too Islamic" have marginalized devout Muslims. Indonesia, during Suharto's New Order regime, similarly restricted Islamic expressions, branding them as anti-national. These examples reveal that secularism, instead of fostering religious freedom, often curtails Muslim religious practices, treating them as inherently incompatible with the state's "secular" identity.

Another element of the liberal world order that has fostered Muslim suffering is Islamophobia. While liberal democracies purport to uphold principles of tolerance and inclusivity, systematic prejudice against Muslims is prevalent across Western societies. In Europe and North America, Islamophobia manifests in policies, media portrayals, and everyday interactions. This systemic prejudice reinforces stereotypes about Muslims, fueling hostility and justifying discriminatory practices.

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The “war on terror,” initiated in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, exemplifies how Islamophobia has been institutionalized under the guise of global security. This war targeted Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, resulting in large-scale violence and loss of life. Civilians, including women and children, were the primary casualties. The narrative of combating “Islamist extremism” also fueled the stigmatization of Muslim identity worldwide, branding entire communities as potential threats. The French political scientist Reynie highlights this alarming pattern, noting that 89.5% of Islamist terrorist attacks have occurred in Muslim-majority countries, and 91.7% of related deaths took place in these countries. Ironically, while the war on terror purportedly aims to protect global security, it has overwhelmingly victimized Muslim communities, both as direct casualties and as targets of discrimination in their own homelands and abroad.

Under the liberal world order, Muslims have also been victims of two ongoing genocides—the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which many view as an attempt to systematically displace Palestinians. The liberal values of equality and human rights have failed to protect these communities from state-sponsored persecution and violence. In Myanmar, the military’s campaign against the Rohingya Muslim population has been brutal, with reports of mass killings, forced displacements, and horrific human rights abuses. This genocide has driven hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into refugee camps in Bangladesh, where they live in desperate conditions. Meanwhile, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians continue to face occupation, displacement, and violence. While the West condemns human rights abuses globally, there is a noticeable double standard when it comes to the treatment of Muslims in these regions.

In China, the situation of the Uyghur Muslims represents another glaring example. The Chinese government has detained over a million Uyghurs in “re-education” camps, justifying this on the grounds of counter-terrorism and social harmony. This practice has included reports of forced labor, surveillance, and cultural erasure. Yet the international response, especially from Western democracies, has been largely symbolic, with limited concrete actions to hold China accountable. The liberal world order’s reluctance to defend Muslims, even when facing ethnic cleansing, reveals a disturbing hypocrisy that undermines the principles of human rights and justice.

The rise of right-wing populism across liberal democracies has also exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiment. Leaders and parties in countries like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom have capitalized on fears surrounding immigration and “Islamization” to gain political support. This narrative often paints Muslim immigrants as threats to national identity, security, and social cohesion. Incidents like the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand underscore the deadly consequences of such rhetoric. These attacks reveal that Muslims are not only marginalized by state policies but are also vulnerable to violence from individuals radicalized by populist ideologies.

In addition to social and political marginalization, Muslims also face economic challenges in the liberal world order. Many Muslim-majority countries struggle with poverty and lack economic leverage on the global stage. Factors like wealth concentration, corruption, and exploitative international treaties contribute to this disparity. For instance, oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia are compelled by international agreements to sell oil in U.S. dollars, limiting their economic independence and reinforcing global financial inequalities.

The economic struggles of many Muslim-majority countries are further compounded by practices like money laundering, where domestic elites siphon wealth out of their countries, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Meanwhile, international financial institutions and trade policies often disadvantage these nations, restricting their economic development. These factors underscore how the liberal world order perpetuates economic disparities that disproportionately affect Muslim countries, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and underdevelopment.

Taking stock, the liberal world order has left Muslims suffering on multiple fronts. Secularism, rather than safeguarding religious freedom, has curtailed Islamic expressions. Islamophobia and the war on terror have systematically marginalized Muslims, both socially and politically. Genocides and ethnic cleansings targeting Muslims continue, with minimal intervention from the global community. Right-wing populism has further stigmatized Muslim identities, and economic inequalities reinforce the vulnerability of Muslim-majority nations. These contradictions reveal the limitations of the liberal order in achieving true inclusivity and protection for all communities. While the ideals of liberal democracy remain noble, their selective application has left Muslims disenfranchised. If the

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liberal world order is to live up to its promises, it must address these systemic inequities and strive for a truly universal application of freedom, equality, and justice.

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