

Prejudiced portrayal of Muslims serves Interests of Western Elites

Interview with Malaysian Intellectual Dr. Chandra Muzaffar

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Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#)

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Malaysian public intellectual believes that propagating fear and hatred of Muslims is not a new phenomenon and has been rampant for more than a thousand years. Referring to the growth of the population of Muslims, he also says that “some right-wing groups in Europe and North America are fearful of what they see as the Islamic ‘demographic’ threat.”

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is a Malaysian political scientist, social activist and academic. He is also the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) which is an international NGO based in Malaysia seeking to critique global injustice and develop an alternative vision of a just and compassionate civilization guided by universal spiritual and moral values.

A widely-published author, Dr. Muzaffar has written more than 20 books in English and Malay on such topics as dialogue of civilizations, inter-faith dialogue, international relations, human rights and Malaysian society. Among his major publications are Protector (1979), Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia (1987), Human Rights and the New World Order (1993), Rights, Religion and Reform (2002), Global Ethic or Global Hegemony? (2005), Hegemony: Justice; Peace (2008) and Religion & Governance (2009).

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar has received numerous awards for his writings and his intellectual activities from different countries.

Muzaffar believes that political and economic institutes in the United States are dominated by the Zionist lobby and this is why the United States cannot adopt an independent and balanced foreign policy, especially with regards to the Muslim nations.

“One of the main reasons why the US elite is not able to abandon its patronage and protection of Israel is because of Zionist influence and power in some of the key sectors of American public life. The US Congress, Senate and the White House are all beholden, in one way or another, to Zionist funds and Zionist lobbies. Zionists are dominant in the upper echelons of finance,” he says.

What follows is the text of an in-depth interview which I conducted with Dr. Muzaffar to discuss different issues such as the public image of Muslims in the West, the rise of Islamophobia and the Muslims-West relations, etc.

Counter Currents’ editor Binu Mathew helped me with contacting Dr. Chandra Muzaffar.

Kourosh Ziabari: Dr. Muzaffar; the Western mainstream media portray a completely biased and prejudiced image of Islam and Muslims, while Muslims have always contributed to the

social, economic, political and scientific advancement and progress of the societies which they live in as minorities. What's your viewpoint in this regard? How should a realistic image of Islam be presented to the Western public?

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar: If no Muslim resorts to terrorism, if no Muslim misinterprets Islamic teachings to justify the suppression of women or the marginalisation of non-Muslim minorities, if no Muslim leader abuses power or violates the rights of his people, it is quite conceivable that the mainstream Western media will have less ammunition to target Muslims and their faith. But I suspect negative stereotyping of Muslims and pejorative representations of Islam will continue to find expression through the influential stratum of Western society. Why?

It is simply because the prejudiced portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media serves the interests of the centers of power in the West. When Palestinians resist Israeli occupation and aggression, it is in the interest of the occupier and its allies in Washington, London, Paris and Berlin to project the victim as the wrongdoer, ever ready to commit violence. Likewise, when the hegemon invaded Iraq for its oil, the mainstream media camouflaged the real motive for the invasion by highlighting that monstrous lie concocted by former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and former US President, George Bush, about Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It is lies like this pedalled by the media that sully the image of Muslims. Anyone who resists US led hegemony is demonised: Muammar Gaddafi became a mass murderer of tens of thousands of his own citizens — a gross exaggeration— because he stood in the way of the NATO-led operation to usurp Libya's oil wealth. Today, Bashar al-Assad of Syria is projected in the media as a bloodthirsty monster — another falsehood— because he has chosen to defend the sovereignty and independence of his country in the face of a concerted attempt by Western powers and their West Asian allies to oust him through military force so that a pliant regime that dances to their tune can be installed in Damascus.

This is why Western hegemony has to end before an honest image of Muslims can emerge. It is not just because of Israel and oil that Muslims and Islam are often tarred and tarnished in the media. It is also because Muslim countries are on the shores of most of the vital sea-routes in the world, the control of which is critical for the pursuit of global power and dominance.

The good news is that Western hegemony is on the decline. The rise of new centres of power from Latin America to East Asia is an irreversible process. For some years now I have been suggesting that Muslim scholars, politicians and media practitioners should as a matter of priority reach out to groups with influence and impact in various parts of the non-Western world to tell them what is really happening in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in West Asia as a whole and why there is so much negative imaging of Islam and Muslims. A bit of this is already being done but much more remains to be done. At the same time, more literature should be produced and circulated in the native languages of the new centres of power that seeks to correct distorted perspectives on jihad, terrorism, the position of women, relations with non-Muslims, the concept of justice and the meaning of compassion and mercy in Islam.

In other words, one should not concentrate only on how Muslims and Islam are perceived in the West. Power is shifting to the East and it is the image of Islam and Muslims in the non-Muslim, non-Western world— such as China— that will really matter in the end.

KZ: As a Muslim-majority country, Malaysia has made remarkable progresses, especially in terms of human development index, economic prosperity and attracting foreign investment. What do you think are the reasons for these achievements? How can the other Islamic states reach such a level?

CM: Malaysia it is true has done relatively well compared to most other Muslim and non-Muslim countries in the Global South. Since achieving Independence from British colonial rule in 1957, the level of absolute poverty within the populace has been reduced from 64% to 3.8% in 2011. Almost the entire population has access to primary health care facilities. 94% of the population is literate. Basic amenities such as piped water and electricity are available to most of the people. Less than 3% of the labour force is unemployed.

Apart from continuous economic development over 55 years, the nation has also been politically stable. Compared to many other countries in the Global South and the Global North, there have been very little political violence. Political succession has been smooth. Malaysia is a functioning democracy in which the elected parliamentary opposition has invariably secured more than 35% of the popular vote.

While the Federal government has been in the hands of the same coalition since Independence, opposition parties have exercised power in various states.

What is really remarkable about Malaysia is that it has succeeded in maintaining a commendable degree of inter-ethnic peace in one of the most challenging multi-religious and multi-cultural environments in the world. In the functional sense, there is also a modicum of inter-ethnic interaction.

What explains the Malaysian success story? A fairly effective public service, a vigorous business sector, a range of commodities which command a global market and a live- and-let live attitude among the people, have all contributed to the nation's well-being. But the single most important factor would be a national leadership since 1957 which has always had a balanced outlook, a sense of justice and fair play, and a grasp of the mechanics of good governance.

Nonetheless, Malaysia is not without blemish. Like so many other countries where the ruling party or coalition has been in power for a long while, elite corruption is a bane. Again like most other countries caught in the web of global capitalism, the gap between the have-a-lot and the have-a-little is getting wider with all its dire consequences. Forging national unity has become an even more complex challenge with growing religiosity expressing itself through the reinforcement of religious exclusiveness.

Still, Malaysia, notwithstanding its challenges, serves as an example to many other countries.

KZ: In one of your interviews, you mentioned that Israel is one of the impediments on the way of the improvement of relationship between the United States and the Muslim states, because the Muslim nations believe that America is a superpower which unconditionally supports Israel at the cost of forfeiting the rights of Muslims and Arabs. Why doesn't the U.S. abandon its sponsorship of Israel in order to maintain better ties with the Muslim nations?

CM: One of the main reasons why the US elite is not able to abandon its patronage and protection of Israel is because of Zionist influence and power in some of the key sectors of American public life. The US Congress, Senate and the White House are all beholden, in one way or another, to Zionist funds and Zionist lobbies. Zionists are dominant in the upper echelons of finance. Look at the ethnic background of almost all the major figures connected to the 2008 sub-prime crisis. Zionist power in the media, including the new media channels, is obvious. The top stratum of leading universities also reflects Zionist presence and influence. Hollywood and the entertainment industry as a whole is another example of subtle Zionist influence. But more than anything else, within US society — and in Europe — there is a great deal of sympathy for the Jews for the terrible suffering they had undergone as a result of the holocaust. This is why in spite of what the Israeli state has done to the Palestinians, Israelis and Jews continue to be viewed as victims to this day.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Israel serves US and European strategic interests in West Asia — the region that is the world's most important oil exporter and the only spot on earth where three continents meet. Some of the world's most critical waterways are also in West Asia. Even if we examine the origins the idea of a Zionist state in 19th century Europe, Zionist and some European leaders were already looking at the future state of Israel as a bulwark for the perpetuation of Western interests.

In spite of strong support for Israel in the US, there are analysts who feel the situation is changing. The overwhelming support that existed for Israel in the first three decades after the 1967 Israel-Arab War has declined somewhat. This is partly because of the extreme positions often adopted by the Israeli ruling elite on the question of Israeli settlements in the West Bank that has disillusioned some so-called liberal Jews in the US. It is said that one of the reasons why Barack Obama won in the recent Presidential Election is because the Zionist lobbies in the US were split.

KZ: The Muslims have always had a distinctive and unique identity which is based on their values, their beliefs and their sanctities. But they usually fear that the Western culture and civilization may affect their youths and wipe out their traditional personality traits in a process of Westernization. What's your take on that? How can the Muslim families preserve their traditional values and resist Westernization?

CM: One of the greatest threats to the Muslim family in the contemporary world emanating from the West is of course the idea of same-sex marriage and the legitimisation of

homosexual behaviour. There is no need to emphasise that the Quranic position on homosexuality is crystal clear. It is regarded as morally reprehensible.

Muslim intellectuals should explain why this is so. It is not simply because the male-female relationship is fundamental to procreation and therefore the continuation of human life. Human life in Islam as in all religions is more than a mere biological fact. It is an affirmation of a profound spiritual truth. The male and female as a pair is integral to the affirmation of that truth which in turn is a testament to the creative power of God. The family which is a product of that relationship between the pair is also *ipso facto* more than a biological entity. Its integrity is rooted in its moral and spiritual foundation. This is why Islam rejects same sex marriage and homosexual relations.

This also means that it is wrong to ostracise and marginalise homosexuals in the private or public spheres. Outside their sexual role, they should be treated as human beings with dignity and compassion. Their right to education, to work, and to perform public roles should be respected. It is significant that Islamic jurisprudence recognises that homosexuals have the same obligations as others to pray, to pay the wealth tax (zakat), to fast and to perform the hajj pilgrimage.

I have elaborated on the question of homosexuality and its challenge to the family to show that in confronting those aspects of contemporary Western civilisation that threaten Islamic norms, there is a need for sophistication. While we do not want to embrace in a blind fashion every freshly minted idea or practice from the West, we should not adhere unthinkingly to our own tradition because it has been sanctioned by some religious elites of antiquity. The bigoted condemnation of homosexuals and homosexuality within some Islamic circles which repudiate the fundamental humanity of the homosexual as a person is unacceptable.

KZ: Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, and The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has predicted that by 2030, the Muslims will be making up some 26.4% of the world's population. Are the Western states, especially those in which the Zionist lobby is influential, afraid of the growth of Muslims and their population? Can we say they don't have an inclination for the rise of religious diversity and multiculturalism in their countries?

CM: There is no doubt at all that some right-wing groups in Europe and North America are fearful of what they see as the Islamic "demographic" threat. True, the Muslim population in Europe and North America is increasing steadily but it is wrong to argue — as some of the right-wing fear-mongers do — that Muslims will take over the West in no time. If one studies the present demographic trend, for many, many decades to come, Muslims will still be a minority in both Europe and North America.

Fear mongering among right-wing groups is motivated to a large extent by their antipathy towards religious and cultural diversity. It is part of a negative attitude towards 'the other'. It stems from an irrational desire to preserve the purity of Western Christianity and Western culture — whatever that means.

For the Right, especially in Europe, Muslims are a problem because they insist on maintaining certain practices which do not jibe with what the Right sees as the European way of life. Many Muslims in Europe observe the 5 times a day prayer requirement; they fast in the month of Ramadan; a number of Muslim women use the hijab (the headscarf) to express their fidelity to modesty; some Muslim men refuse to consume alcohol at office

parties.

There is no reason why Muslims should forsake any of the forms and practices which they feel is central to their identity. These practices do not impinge upon the rights of the others. What Muslims should do is to explain in depth the rationale behind important Islamic practices to their non-Muslim fellow citizens. This is the sort of dialogue that they should initiate.

In fact, their dialogue should go beyond explaining Islamic religious requirements and practices. There are vital principles and values in the Quran which should be brought to the attention of the West at this juncture in history. Based upon Quranic principles, Islamic jurisprudence discourages debt transaction — which was one of the underlying causes of the sub-prime financial crisis in the US in 2008. The Quran is critical of living beyond one's means which explains to some extent the sovereign debt crisis in parts of Europe. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam rejects the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the growing gap between the have-a-lot and the have-a-little in society, which has become a feature of a number of countries in the West and the East.

If Quranic values and principles which in any case are universal and inclusive are put across to non-Muslim majorities in Europe and North America, it is quite possible that over time some of them will become more open and accommodative towards the Muslim minorities in their midst.

KZ: What's your viewpoint regarding the rise of Islamophobia in the West, as manifested in movies such as "Fitna" or "Innocence of Muslims" or the publication of sacrilegious materials in Danish and French newspapers which insulted Prophet Muhammad and other sanctities of the Muslims? What are the possible root causes of such attacks being unleashed on the Muslims?

CM: Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. It is more than a thousand two hundred years old. When Muslim civilisation first rose as a power from the eighth century onwards with huge numbers of people embracing the faith around the Mediterranean, in North Africa and in the Iberian Peninsula — which were all largely Christian— the Church reacted by publishing a distorted translation of the Quran in Latin. The denigration of Islam and the vilification of the Prophet Muhammad continued through the centuries. The Crusades launched by European Rulers and blessed by the Church from the end of the eleventh century were not only directed at the conquest of Jerusalem but were also aimed at curbing Islamic power.

Islamophobia, the fear of Islam, in the past, it is apparent, was related to power. Is Islamic power the root cause of Islamophobia today? Islamophobia today appears to be an attempt

to create fear and uneasiness about a religion and a civilisation, segments of which are determined to resist the West's, specifically, the US's hegemonic power. Contemporary Islamophobia in that sense is also linked to power.

Today, cartoons are drawn, books are written, and films are produced to demean and defile the Prophet in particular, knowing full well that a segment of the Muslim Ummah (community) is bound to be provoked to burn flags, ransack embassies, and even kill themselves and others. Each time such a provocation occurs, the reaction is predictable. It serves to reinforce the stereotype image of Muslims as violence prone, terror inclined people. This image in turn helps the hegemon and its minions in their mission of discrediting legitimate resistance movements — be they Palestinian or Lebanese or Iraqi or Somali — that resort to violence in order to liberate their land from hegemony.

This is why Muslims should not fall into the trap laid by Danish cartoons or US films. By all means condemn these provocations in a peaceful manner. But do not resort to any form of violence. Protest through other means. It would be so much better if we seized the moment to do a film or write a book or pamphlet that conveys the truth about the Prophet's life. For instance, we could have turned around the recent provocation in the film *Innocence of Muslims* by emphasising that the Prophet had remained monogamous right till the death of his first wife, Khadijah, and his subsequent marriages were all contracted to strengthen inter-tribal solidarity or forge inter-faith ties.

Besides, we must keep in mind that when the Prophet himself was abused and even physically attacked during his Meccan years, he displayed tremendous restraint and did not retaliate with violence. It is his example that we should emulate.

KZ: On the political level, what do you think about President Obama's policy toward the Muslim world in his first term? Has he succeeded in realizing what he had promised to the Muslim nations, especially in his 2009 Cairo speech? What's your evaluation of his second term?

CM: There were some promising elements in President Obama's 2009 Cairo Speech especially his acknowledgement of the suffering of the Palestinian people. But he did very little to translate his rhetoric into action. He not only failed to move the Palestine-Israel Peace Process forward but he also allowed himself to be humiliated by one of the most bellicose Israeli leaders ever, Benjamin Netanyahu. Iraq, in spite of US troop withdrawal, remains a tragic tale of a nation mired in unending violence. Afghanistan is another sordid mess.

The US drive for hegemony has not ceased under Obama as evidenced by US involvement in Libya and Syria. Iran is still in his crosshairs. He continues to prop up the Saudi and Qatari elite and elites in other feudal, autocratic kingdoms in the [Persian] Gulf, while pretending that the US is a champion of democracy.

Will Obama's second term be different? I suspect that the US economy will absorb most of his energies in the second term. Nonetheless, he will have to pay attention to international issues too. Since he does not have to worry about a third term, will he be courageous enough to push aside all the powerful lobbies in the US, including the Zionist and Christian Right lobbies, and do what is right and true in West Asia and the rest of the world? There is

nothing in Obama's personality or his politics that appears to suggest that he will go all out to fight for justice regardless of the consequences.

We must have the audacity to hope for this: that Obama will prove us all wrong.

KZ: What do you think about the economic sanctions imposed against Iran by the United States and its European allies? Iran is under pressure over its nuclear program while there's no shred of evidence confirming that it has been developing nuclear weapons. We also have Israel's constant war threats against Iran which have been intensified recently. What should Iran and other Muslim nations do about such threats?

CM: Iran is another colossal tragedy. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution it has been under tremendous pressure from the US and other Western powers. Economic sanctions, which are nothing but instruments of war, imposed by the US have been in force for the last 33 years.

Iran's 'sin' is that it wants to safeguard its independence as a sovereign nation. It wants to chart its own future; shape its own destiny. Because the Iranian Revolution overthrew a US-Israeli client, Reza Shah, both US and Israel and their European allies have not forgiven the revolutionaries.

In spite of all the difficulties it has undergone, Iran has remained steadfast. It has not succumbed to the US and its allies. It has not yielded to the hegemon.

Unfortunately, there are very few Muslim majority states that are prepared to stand up for Iran. If they are silent, it is because a number of them are close allies of the US and will not want to antagonise the US in any way. Others are afraid of the repercussions if they take Iran's side. In fact, non-Muslim states such as Cuba and Venezuela have been far more vocal in their defence of Iran in the midst of all the reckless allegations about its nuclear weapons programme. Their expression of solidarity proves yet again that in the struggle for truth and justice, it is not one's religious affiliation that is the decisive factor.

What can Iran do in this situation? Apart from continuing to cooperate with the IAEA which is important, Iran should speak more loudly than ever before on behalf of a nuclear weapons free West Asia and North Africa (WANA). I know Iran has expressed its support for this idea before. But it should do more. It should spearhead an international campaign for such a zone in WANA. It should get governments, NGOs and the media involved.

KZ: And finally; Iran has just assumed the 3-year presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement. What's your viewpoint about the role this movement can play in the international level? How can it effectively contribute to world developments and help with the establishment of a new world order?

CM: Like other similar global and regional organisations, the effectiveness of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is hampered to a great extent by its internal ideological diversity. We should therefore be realistic about our expectations of NAM.

Nonetheless, as NAM Chairman, Iran can utilise its leadership position to at least initiate some meaningful changes. It should work hand in hand with Venezuela which will assume the chair after Iran's three year term. This is a great opportunity for the two countries that share many common aspirations vis-a-vis the international system to set a new tone for NAM

over a six year period.

What are some of the goals that NAM can pursue?

- A) NAM can take a strong moral position against speculation in the international financial system and mobilise global public opinion against this vice. It should apply pressure against the centres of speculative capital such as London and New York.
- B) NAM should also call for the stabilisation of global food prices. Here again it should target speculators whose immoral activity is responsible for perhaps 20 % of the rise in food prices in recent months. At the same time, NAM should encourage member states to adopt concrete measures to increase food production.
- C) NAM should also focus upon the global environmental crisis and explore ways and means of dovetailing development to the larger goal of ecological harmony.
- D) NAM should also lend support to efforts undertaken by various groups and individuals in different parts of the world, including Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, to eliminate war as a means of resolving inter-state and intra-state conflicts.
- E) NAM should commence serious discussions within the movement on the underlying spiritual and moral values that are essential for the evolution of a just, compassionate civilisation that is free of global hegemony, gross inequalities, glaring social injustices, and religious bigotry. It is only when the underlying values conduce towards justice and compassion that a new civilisation will emerge capable of enhancing human dignity and protecting the integrity of creation.

Kourosh Ziabari is an award-winning Iranian journalist and media correspondent. In 2010, he received the national medal of Superior Iranian Youth from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his media activities. He writes for Global Research, Counter Currents, Tehran Times, Iran Review and other publications across the world. His articles and interviews have been translated in 10 languages.

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