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Religious Pluralism and Peace: Lessons from the Medina Charter

By Mohamed Bin Ali

Synopsis

The Medina Charter constituted by Prophet Muhammad in 622 in Arabia was intended to end inter-tribal conflicts and maintain peace and cooperation among the Medinan people 1,400 years ago. Many lessons can be drawn from the Charter to enhance peaceful inter-religious relations today amid current moves to revive this historic document.

Commentary

THE MEDINA Charter (Arabic: *Sahifah Medina* or *Dustur Medina*) is arguably known to be the first constitution ever written incorporating religion and politics. Drawn up by Prophet Muhammad, the Charter was intended to end inter-tribal conflicts and maintain peace and cooperation among the people of Medina, which, after Mecca, is Islam's second holiest place where the first Muslim community was established. It constituted a formal agreement between Prophet Muhammad and all the tribes and families of Yathrib (the old name for Medina) including Muslims, Jews, Christians and pagans.

The Charter serves as an example for resolving disputes where peace and pluralism were achieved not through violence but rather respect, tolerance, and peaceful means. Many lessons could be drawn from the Charter to enhance religious pluralism in the contemporary world. In the current times, many people are grappling with finding solutions to inter-religious conflicts and tensions. The Medina Charter is seen as a useful guide to help mediate conflicts in the world today that are driven by politics, economics and religious ideologies.

Essentials of the Medina Charter

Today, Muslim scholars have acknowledged the importance of the Medina Charter to deconstruct contemporary extremist discourse. Essentially, the charter reflects Islam's protection of human life and religious minorities and reiterates that these notions have always been fundamental in the Islamic tradition.

The Medina Charter was drawn up by Prophet Muhammad upon his migration from Mecca to Medina in 622. The constitution establishes rights and obligations among the people of Medina known as the *Ansar* and those who migrated with the Prophet (the *Muhajirun*), and the Jewish tribes of Medina as they embarked upon a new journey of co-existence and co-operation.

Prophet Muhammad's inspiration for this pluralistic model was the Quran, which makes it incumbent upon Muslims to accept and respect all of the previous messengers without distinction and honour their communities. Using the Quran as guidance, the Prophet attempted to spread peace and establish unity in Medina. He created a community or *ummah* that was made up of diverse communities and faiths.

The Charter gave equality to all its citizens and accepted the coexistence of different religions in the community. Under the constitution, all religious, ethnic and tribal groups had equal protection, rights and dignity. They would live by their own beliefs and judge themselves by their own laws.

The Medina Charter is not the only document drafted by Prophet Muhammad to establish peace with non-Muslims. In 628, he granted a Charter of Privileges to the Christian monks of St. Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai. This charter consisted of several articles covering issues such as protection of Christians, freedom of worship and movement, and the right to protection in war.

All communities as one nation

When Prophet Muhammad arrived in Medina he discovered a diverse population consisting of many different tribes, who had also been fighting each other for nearly a century.

One of the most significant features of the Medina Charter is the recognition of all different communities as one nation (*ummah*) regardless of religions and tribes. The first clause in the Charter started with the statement "They are a single community". This is seen as a very important first step taken by Prophet Muhammad to unite the Medinan communities, and reflects the diverse nature of human beings made up of different races and religions.

As the Quran says, God created human beings from different tribes and communities so that they can get to know each other (Quran 49:13). This translates into mutual cooperation and a sense of belonging and ownership as the essence of unity in Islam.

The other important value that could be drawn from the Charter is tolerance. Prophet Muhammad successfully inculcated the value of tolerance in the hearts of the

Medinan people. Article 30 of the Charter highlights the value of religious tolerance, particularly among Jews and Muslims. This notion of religious tolerance is rooted in the Quran in several verses.

Relevance of the Medina Charter today

The Medina Charter has set out many of the principles essential to the peaceful functioning of a pluralistic society. The Charter has established many important values and lessons that are really needed today for enhancing religious pluralism and tolerance as well as finding resolutions to inter-religious conflicts.

Through the Charter, Prophet Muhammad has drawn upon the essence of unity, respect, tolerance, and love to combine and create a pluralistic community. These attributes are deemed important in the context of living in a plural society. For instance, the concept of unity as it refers to nations can be translated into putting one's country above all other considerations when it comes to issues of security and defence. Hence, for example, Singaporeans should abide by the law of their country as long as they live in it as "one united people". They should defend their homeland from foreign threats because they are first and foremost Singaporeans.

The other key lessons that could be drawn from the Medina Charter include religious freedom, security of the community, acceptance of followers of religions as one nation, and the need for all religious communities to protect one another from any threats, discrimination and oppression. It is about giving space and understanding for both majority and minority citizens to enjoy their rights, pertinent to their needs in areas of faith, socio-political circumstances and other unique needs. The aim is to truly build one united people who feel comfortable and safe with each other.

Revival of the Charter

In light of the atrocities and persecution of religious minorities by ISIS and like-minded groups, Muslim scholars have called for the revival of the Medina Charter. They have come together in a conference that was convened in January 2016 in Marakkesh, Morocco. The conference aimed at reaffirming the Constitution of Medina and discussed legal frameworks around the premise of '*The Rights of Minorities in Predominately Muslim Lands*'.

Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies and King Mohammed VI of Morocco who hosted the conference said the Medina Charter affirmed the unity of the society in terms of religious pluralism and freedom of religion. But despite its obvious importance, it has not garnered much study. Hence, it is time the Medina Charter is studied, analysed and its contents revived and applied to build a more tolerant, inclusive and peaceful global community.

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