

Myanmar: Why secularism matters

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In almost every socialist publication of the 21st century, whenever the self-claimed socialists discuss the term “secularism”, they like to discuss it by criticising the liberal left like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and the new atheism movement. There may be nothing wrong with the critiques as such, but they may betray the Eurocentric mindset of the privileged people who were born in secular nations where religious textbooks and their teachings are unlikely to oppress the masses.

Socialists from different generations had successfully carried out their task of advocating secularism for several decades since the 1890s. The Paris Commune successfully separated the church and the state. The October Revolution also followed the same example. The Spanish revolution and other socialist influenced revolutions also kept this tradition of secularism. As a result, most of the developed countries these days have maintained their secularism even under liberal and conservative governments. Even if there are some far-right conservative groups trying to harm the LGBT and women’s rights movements with their backward religious teachings, socialists have a record of pushing them back. However, all of these ended when “Islam” became a scapegoat for all the ugly policies of western imperialism. When the United States and its imperialistic allies resurrected political Islam, a locally rooted reactionary political movement in the Middle East as well as in some developing countries, during the Cold War to push back the USSR’s Stalinist regimes, Islamism became a threat to the secularism of the Middle Eastern countries, undoing all of the secular progress there. As a result, the secular left throughout the Middle East became scapegoats for the power struggle between two imperialist powers, USSR and the West. Since then, the USA and its imperialism have lost control of the Islamism they resurrected. In the meantime, a significant number of leftists in the west have become reactionary and hypocritical when it comes to Islamic fundamentalism. As a result, the majority of this entitled privileged left fraction, who have never been oppressed by religious government or religious autocracy, began to accuse legitimate third-world progressives like Salman Rushdie, Maryam Namazie, and Masih Alinejad of being reactionaries and Islamophobes.

As an underprivileged working-class socialist who has faced a lot of discrimination in life (just because I was born into a Muslim family in a Buddhist-dominated third world country), I can sympathise with those third world ex-Muslim progressives and those immigrants who have endured a lot of blatant racism. They’ve suffered a lot that most of these entitled privileged left fractions would never have thought of. That privilege itself manifests the saviour complex within the privileged whites left out of their guilty conscience. The second generation of immigrants, who are similarly privileged in terms of secularism because they have never lived in non-secular third world countries, reinforced such salvific complexity. They may have experienced severe discrimination because they are the offspring of immigrants, but at least they will not be arrested for being who they are or for what they believe in. That itself explains how the second generation of immigrant parents are privileged over the same racial identity groups who were born into third world countries. Even though all workers need to be united under the banner of socialism, it doesn’t necessarily mean workers should be united with the lumpenproletariat who will betray the cause. It’s important for a worker to assess their privileges over other workers. It’s important to

acknowledge their privilege in order to understand the sufferings of underprivileged workers. Otherwise, the privileged workers might act as lumpenproletariat or reactionaries, which might consequently affect the lives of the underprivileged workers. Such reactionary elements reinforce one another, and self-proclaimed socialist parties began recruiting ultra-religious immigrants to fill their diversity quotas. Even after recruiting the ultra-religious immigrants just to prove their anti-racist politics, some of those regressive fractions failed to educate them to become materialists and, consequently, atheists. Sometimes, there are some fractions of socialists who claim “religious workers” should not be criticised for being religious. Let me clarify by saying that the above statement has nothing to do with religious workers. However, the above sentence has everything to do with the party members who identify themselves as communists, socialists, or Marxists. To simplify what is meant, some writings by Leon Trotsky need to be referenced. Leon Trotsky once wrote:

“Naturally, we maintain the most considerate attitude toward the religious prejudices of a backward worker. Should he desire to fight for our program, we would accept him as a party member; but at the same time, our party would persistently educate him in the spirit of materialism and atheism.”

By analysing what Leon Trotsky wrote, it's apparent that religious workers are alright even with their backwardness. They will not and should not be discriminated against for their religious prejudices. However, a socialist party member or a communist who will actively fight against imperialism, capitalism and other reactionary forces should be educated properly to understand materialism in order to become a legitimate Marxist who understands the concepts that Lenin and Trotsky believed in. Otherwise, they might end up becoming the reactionaries they should be fighting against. Lenin also wrote something similar as well. Referring to Lenin's article “Socialism & Religion”, Lenin wrote “we demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned. But by no means can we consider religion a private affair so far as our Party is concerned.” In addition, Leon Trotsky once again wrote a straight-forward sentence about those kinds of religious party members who claimed their loyalty to both communist party and the religion. The sentence is as below: “Whoever fails to struggle against religion is unworthy of bearing the name of a revolutionist.”

In the imperialistic developed countries, the blasphemy laws are no longer active. People are free to choose their own genders and lifestyles, free of social pressures. People in third-world countries, on the other hand, are unable to choose their genders or how they live their lives. In most third world countries, LGBT people are being oppressed by their authoritarian governments and the religious teachings the governments claim to believe in. Here, there are some reactionary elements in the western world who are too privileged to acknowledge a simple fact about religions. Referring an article of a self-claiming socialist group called “Solidarity(Australia)”, they claimed Islam is not to blame for homophobia. Such kind of claim is not only ignorant but also opportunistic as well. As an ex-Muslim socialist who once had studied a lot on my own religion, which is Islam, I reckon “Surah Al-A'raf” and the hadith teachings should be referenced to expose homophobic, transphobic, and sexist values within Islam. For those reactionary Eurocentric privileged self-claiming leftists who think Islam should not be blamed for homophobia and transphobia, personally, it would be great to see them travelling to University of Jihad in Pakistan as well as some other authentic Islamic universities in order to set up a series of debate on the LGBT issues. In this way, people will know who has more religious knowledge regarding LGBT issues. Apparently, the prophet Muhammad was reported to say ““If you find anyone doing as Lot's people did, kill the one who does it, and the one to whom it is done” in “Sunan Abu Dawood”, a hadith widely accepted by most Islamic communities all over the world. Such kind of blatant homophobia and transphobia are too toxic for a progressive person to believe in since it is calling for a murder of LGBTQ people. Thus, every fraction of the socialist left who would like to claim LGBTQ friendliness in a non-hypocritical way should defend

secularism, the right to blasphemy, and the right to critically offend religions, including Islam.

In third world countries which were also referred to as the Global South by some Eurocentric left fractions, there are blasphemy laws which could lead a person to be sentenced to jail just for saying something controversial. For example, A religious reformist in Myanmar called "Shin Nyar Na" had to spend around 30 years of his life just for interpreting Buddhism in a nonconventional way. Some foreigners who visited Myanmar were arrested just for decorating Buddha statues with headphones in a club. In Pakistan, Ahmadiyya Muslims are being persecuted for believing in a different kind of Islam. These are the reasons secularism is necessary for every country. The right to be a person who can believe in anything they want, the right to worship in any way they want, and the right to interpret the holy books in non-conventional ways are the values that can be achieved only under the banner of secularism. To achieve secularism, we needed to unite the secular minority of the population. Apparently, not all secularists are Marxists in our country. There are a lot of liberal atheists, humanists, and neoliberal progressives who are secular. Even if they claim themselves as Marxists, there are a lot of different Marxist tendencies in our countries, ranging from Maoists and Stalinists to Trotskyists and social democrats.

Here, to link the very basic definition of secularism with what socialists believe, let me quote Lenin's article "Socialism and Religion". Lenin stated that "Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority." Lenin wrote that in 1905. However, in third countries, such simple political values were not fulfilled yet even in the 21st century. Our female comrades are being shamed for having sex before marriage, let alone criticizing the nuclear family. Engels argues that "the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife." Our religious teachings told us: "As to those women on whose part you fear disobeying with arrogance, ill-conduct and rebellion, admonish them (first), (then if they persist), forsake them in bed (i.e. turn them your back), and (last) beat them". Let alone calling for women's rights and speaking out against domestic violence, the Quran said husbands can beat wives. Such kind of religious teachings pave the way for domestic violence against the women by their husbands. Furthermore, Prophet Mohammad once said, "A nation which gives its leadership to a woman will not prosper." In this way, it paves the way for the women to be treated as second- or third-class citizens even in their own country, state, and the nuclear family. Therefore, it would be hypocritical for someone to declare themselves in favour of women's rights while failing to condemn the religions that are anti-women in nature.

Socialists should be secular at any cost. Being secular and being anti-racist are not oxymoronic. One can still defend the values of secularism while being an anti-racist. Discrimination among citizens on account of their religious convictions should be wholly intolerable to a socialist. No subsidies should be granted to the established church, nor state allowances made to ecclesiastical and religious societies. After all, these are the very basic characteristics of genuine secularism. Such characteristics can also be found in one of Lenin's articles, "Socialism & Religion," as well. However, the very basic definition of secularism is supposed to be challenged in Islam. In Islam, the very basic goal of the religious teaching is to establish the Islamic State with the laws and teachings reflected by the holy books. A religious autocracy and a separation between the church and the state are indeed oxymoronic.

It's outrageous to see abortion rights stripped off from women in the USA. The public response, especially the response from the left, was inspiring. However, the whole incident makes me think one thing. A single regressive policy was passed and the whole population became outraged against the Christian right and the reactionary far-right segments of the population. And yet, when we, the underprivileged colonised third world people, became angry at the religious fundamentalists and the religious organisations that oppressed us for decades, probably for centuries, we were called islamophobes and reactionaries. That explains how the limited experiences of western

reactionary regressive leftists due to their entitlement and privileges have blinded them with ignorance. The abortion rights were attacked for once, and they became outrageous. Our mothers, our sisters, and our beloved ones are always in danger of their toxic patriarchal values (originated from religious teachings) of overvaluing virgins, honour killings, and treating women as objects owned by the male. However, whenever we try to push back such kind of sexist, homophobic, transphobic and conservative Islamists, we are called Islamophobes and our allies are silenced. With such kind of hypocritical actions influencing some fractions of the western left, personally, my hatred grows against these regressive left fractions, as they're serving the role of lumpenproletariat over our lives and struggles. They've become reactionary obstacles on our revolutionary journey.

Anti-racism politics is necessary given the climate of xenophobia in the west. Immigrants have every right to find a place where they can live their lives peacefully and happily. Some of them are still forced to carry the trauma of the regimes they had to face in their original countries. It's lucky for the second generation not to suffer the same fate as the first-generation immigrants. However, a line should be drawn in anti-racism politics. The western world is already imperialist in real-world politics. Whatever happens in their countries, there are several civil society organisations, NGOs, and academics who are waiting to import or impose it on third world countries. If an imperialist country like the United States decided to ban Islamophobic contents today (there are some reactionaries pushing that kind of regressive agenda, such as Ilhan Omar), there will be a lot of regressive and reactionary regimes in third countries that will use that as a weapon to silence the respective country's progressive wings. Even though these reactionary tyrannical regimes claim themselves to be anti-imperialist because they're anti-US, they will never think twice about adopting the policies that would benefit their ideologies, mostly religious fundamentalism. Here I would like to quote Leila Al-Shami to address the imperialist nature of these days. In 2018, Leila Al-Shami wrote an article called "the anti-imperialism of idiots". The article stated that "anti-imperialism of idiots is one which equates imperialism with the actions of the US alone." In the 21st century, it's important to note that imperialism is not limited to the west and the US anymore.

Summing up, religion is opium for the people. Religion is a type of spiritual alcohol in which the slaves of capital drown their desire for a life more or less deserving of man and their human image. However, a slave who has grown to fight for their freedom after becoming aware of their condition has already partially stopped being one. Here, it's up to the self-proclaimed socialists to decide whether to support the people who decided to fight for their freedom or not. Apparently, those who chose to support the conformists who decided to cling to their religious prejudices should not call themselves "revolutionaries" as they're "reactionaries". To support a slave who has grown to fight for their freedom after being aware of their condition, one should advocate for "socialism", "social justice", and "liberty". All these values require secularism to thrive along with them.

Hein Htet Kyaw (Abu Bakr) is a socialist hacktivist actively struggling against the state blasphemy laws and state censorship in Myanmar. He is a spokesperson for an atheist/humanist organisation called Burmese Atheists. He describes himself as a libertarian Marxist who sees Stalinism as oppressive and exploitative as capitalism, probably more.

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