# Prospect of Secularism and the Muslim Society of Zanzibar

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ZANZIBAR – TANZANIA

Abstract: - Secularism is a political situation which is being followed in Tanzania including Zanzibar as a part of Tanzania. Due to its interpretation, secularism brings ambiguity in the overall implication in the country. It is referred to the form of life that does not rely on any religious belief. Therefore, this paper is intended to examine the prospect of secularism in Zanzibar along with its implications within the Islamic society of Zanzibar. This is a descriptive and analytical type of study; in that respect, it proposes to use a qualitative approach, in which observation techniques, written documents, and internet sources were applied to collect the data, which were analyzed and presented in the form of thematic descriptions of secularism in the context of Zanzibar. The finding of this study revealed that Zanzibar is a semi secular state and that Islamic religion is dominant in the government institutions. It is the author's hope that the study provides the readers with a good perception of the nature of secularism as experienced in the Islamic context of Zanzibar. The study recommends that the people of Zanzibar should opt for a political system that is in need of them without intervening with their Islamic culture while observing the ethics of other beliefs despite their minority.

Key words: secularism, Zanzibar

#### I. CONCEPTS OF SECULARISM

Different scholars have tried to describe the term secularism such as Mahmood Monshipouri who writes: "secularism is generally known as an ideology that advocates for the eradication of religious influence in political, social, and educational institutions". Monshipouri describes George Jacob Holyoake's understanding of secularism that maintains that science was the sole providence of humankind, and that reason was the measure of truth that people's rightful concern was with the removal of inequalities in this world rather than with possible compensation for such inequalities in another life. He added that the state should be impartial in religious matters, and that all religious and philosophical doctrines should be equally tolerated.

While examining the roots of secularism, M. Balasubramanian wrote the following:

Nehru's secularism stood against all discriminations based on religion, race or caste, spurned communal approach to human problem, afforded an equal place in society to members of minority communities to live a honourable life along with the

members of the majority community and conceived India as a place for harmonious living for citizens, no matter to what religion or group they belong.<sup>iii</sup>

From the quotation, Balasubramanian asserts that secularism is an ideology, which is against all discriminations based on religion, race, or caste and that it enables people of different communities to live the honourable life regardless of their beliefs.

The state cannot be officially linked to some religious confession, except in a vestigial and largely symbolic sense, as in England or Scandinavia. Secularism involves in fact a complex requirement, which can be classified in the categories of the French Revolution trinity: liberty, equality, and fraternity. First, no one must be forced in the domain of religion, or basic belief. This is what is often defined as religious liberty, including of course, the freedom of not to believe. Second, there must be equality between people of different faiths. Third, all spiritual families must be heard, included in the ongoing process of determining what the society is about and how it is going to realize these goals. This is what corresponds to "fraternity".

The issues concerning secularism have evolved in different Western societies in recent decades because the faiths represented to those societies have changed. For example, the recent legislation in France against wearing the *hijab* in schools. Indeed, the point of state neutrality is precisely to avoid favouring or disfavouring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious. One cannot favour Christianity over Islam, but also one cannot favour religion over against nonbelief in religion, or vice versa. In its insistence towards secularism, the French government planned to submit to parliament a draft law banning religious symbols such as Islamic headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, and large Christian crosses from state schools. The banner reads "Equality, Fraternity".

According to Abdullah Al-Naim the word "secular" derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning "great span of time" or, more closely, "spirit of the age." In consistent with time, the meaning changed to "of this world," which implies the presence of more than one world. Ultimately, the term came to be understood as reflecting a distinction between

secular and religious concepts. In the European context, the term evolved from "secularization" as privatization of church lands to the secularization of politics, art, and economics. Secularism does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public life of a society. However, it is the misconception that led to some Muslims to be hostile to the concept. According to An-Naim, secularism is totally hypothetical notion of strict and systematic separation in all aspects of the relationship between religion and the state. vii

Secularism has two major manifestations, which are asserting the right to be free from religious rule and teachings rejecting the imposition by government of religion or religious practices upon its people and the view that public activities and decisions should be uninfluenced by religious beliefs and practices. It has been argued that secularism is a movement towards modernization away from traditional religious values. This type of secularism, on a social or philosophical level, has often occurred while maintaining an official state support of religion. For instance in the United State some argue that state secularism has served to protect religion from governmental interference. It

The term "secularism" was first used by the British writer George Jacob Holyoake in 1851. He tried to describe his views of promoting a social order separate from religion, without criticizing any belief. He argued:

Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever..x

George Holyoake defines secularism as a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.

Though some Christian fundamentalists oppose secularism claiming that there is a "radical secularist" ideology, which they often see as a threat to "Christian rights" Many of them support a secular state, and acknowledge that the conception has support in Biblical teachings, such as the statement of Jesus in Luke: "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Countries like United States, France, India, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey, are often considered "constitutionally secular" however, none of them have identical forms of governance. Most modern democracies are generally recognized as secular due to the near-complete freedom of religion and the lack of authority of religious leaders over political decisions. xiii

According to various descriptions, it is noticed that secularism is not intended to favour or negate any religious faith or spirituality as such. This non-interference policy advocated by secularism has been adopted in several constitutions in the world today. Arguably, secularism an ideology bestows to the state the freedom to deal with its affairs without interference from religious authorities that the state conducts its administrative functions without being influenced by any religious considerations.

## II. PRINCIPLES OF A SECULAR STATE

We can detect from descriptions of different scholars a number of principles of a secular state whereby a major principle is that the secular society asserts that people should be equal before the law, and that the state is the best guarantor of this equality. The secular society intends to introduce the point of state neutrality as to avoid favouring or disfavouring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious. It cannot favour Christianity over Islam, but also it cannot favour religion over against nonbelief in religion, or vice versa. XIII

The secular society advocates for the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations. Basically, secularist calls for the separation of religion from politics claiming that religion is too lofty to sublime to become involved in politics. In other words, the secularists say that religion should make a retreat and leave the lives to be governed by a Godless law. xiv

The secular state affirms that freedom of expression and the free criticism of institutions and ideas are fundamental human rights essential to a civilised state. Balasubramanian describes the US form of secular state in this way:

Here the object was to give equal freedom to its citizens, in religious, political, economic and other aspects. It was not to promote one religion at the cost of other religions. Its primary object was not to promote secular end but to avoid partisan attitude, but guaranteeing to its citizens the right to freedom of religion. So its position with regard to religion was strict neutrality.<sup>xv</sup>

The above quotation denotes that secularism was intended to give equal freedom to the citizens in all aspects of human life including religion, politics, and economics. It further indicates that though the religious institution is respected no religion is regarded superior to another; it is left to the citizens to decide whether or not they wish to adhere to a certain religion. There is a variety of secular states that emerged in the world applying different forms of secularism. Tanzania as one among the secular states has its form of secularism, as I will demonstrate here below.

Balasubramanian examined that the Nehru's secularism had stood against all discriminations based on

religion, race or caste. It afforded an equal place in society to members of minority communities to live an honourable life along with the members of the majority community and conceived India as a place for harmonious living for citizens. XVIII

# III. INTRODUCTION OF SECULARISM TO ISLAMIC STATES

Secularism is believed to have been introduced into Muslim societies through European contact and influence. This has reinforced the commonly-held perception among Muslims that secularism is an externally imposed ideology that reflects European imperial interests. \*viii\* Owing to that, many Muslims reject secularism and dismiss it as insignificant and irrelevant to their societies.

However, some Muslim societies have adopted secularism as a system that affords them protection from tyranny, domination and intolerance to the extent that secular-minded leaders have ruled their Muslim countries emphasizing separation between religion and politics and have secularized their legal and educational systems. Good examples of these leaders were Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran, Muhammad Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Muammar Mohammed Qaddafi of Libya, and Zulfaqar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. xix

Thus, Muslim leaders did not consider secular norms and Islamic social ethics as incompatible but rather both have a common concern for humanity. According to Monshipouri, it is possible to find within Islam elements that are in agreement with certain values of secularism positing:

Whereas Islamic humanism emphasizes the interconnections among faith, social justice, and equality, secular humanism stresses the interlocking nature of reason, choice, and liberty and has regularly concerned itself with social justice and equality.<sup>xx</sup>

Actually, most Muslims living as minorities have adapted themselves to secular political systems.

According to Fahd Salman Al-Oadah, the Christians had worked in cooperation with the Jews to bring about the downfall of the Caliphate that had been infiltrated by people like Medhat Pasha, an influential Jew, during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Pasha had a role to play in the ratification of the country's constitution and the granting of freedoms that he had been a vocal advocate. As a result, the West hailed Pasha as "the father of freedom". He guaranteed minority rights, including the right of the Jews to conduct themselves as they wished under the protection of the Ottoman Empire. The Westerners sponsored many young secularists to study in Western countries. When they returned to their own countries, they were described as "cultured" or "enlightened" that they would work within the government against the scholars and Islamic activists.

The secularists such as Kemal Attaturk employed various methods to spread their ideas where the most important of them were the following three: First was to substitute Islamic values and mores with their own through the media, education, economics, and politics. Second was to effect social change by targeting women. A third process was a technique of exploiting ethnic and religious minorities by arguing that the minorities were part of society that they would be more sincerely committed to secularist reforms. xxiii

#### IV. ISLAMIC STANCE TO SECULARISM

Apparently, secularism is just a contemporary manifestation of *Jâhiliyyah* (ignorance), and that the struggle between Islam and secularism is nothing new. It is just a long run struggle between Islam and *Jâhiliyyah* in a new guise. The *Jâhiliyyah* of old appealed to the pagan practices of the Arabian tribes, while secularists want Muslims to appeal to the constitutions and laws of other countries contrary to Islam. \*xxiv\* However, secularists in Muslim lands believe that the affairs of the society can never be set right except by importing systems of law from the East or West. In that sense, the conflict between Islam and secularism is none other than the conflict between Islam and polytheism. \*xxv\*

Christianity and Islam are fundamentally different in their views towards separation of religion from politics that the popular argument based upon Jesus's command to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's as proof that Christianity accepts the separation of life into religion and the state. The one that the other hand, Islam represents an inseparable unity in a life ruled by God. Arguably, secularism seeks to subordinate Islam and reduce its natural supremacy to one corner of life — an agenda that Islam must refuse. Secularism has no place in the Muslim world because it is impossible for a Muslim to manage the political and economic affairs of the society to other than Allah, Quran stipulates: "We have neglected nothing in the Book." And "We have sent down to you the Book explaining all things" The order to the second to the second that Islam must refuse.

Independence movements of many parts of the Muslim world employed Islamic symbols, to legitimate their struggle (*jihad*). Thus, for example, the Algerian 'ulama' declared *jihad* in denouncing French rule and reaffirming Algeria's Arab-Islamic heritage; however, many Islamists bitterly remember how was the Algerian military, supported by secular elites, intervened and cancelled popular elections in 1992 when Islamist parties were successful. Moreover, the Muslim nationalism in the Indian subcontinent became the reason for the creation of Pakistan. xxx

Many Muslims, in particular Islamists, cast secularism as a foreign doctrine imposed by colonial powers. Muslims hold up traditional Islamic society, particularly during the first century of Islam, as an ideal model reflecting

religious principles guiding the community in all areas of life, including politics. xxxi

Nonetheless, some scholars, including Qaradawi, have argued that secularism, as it appears in the Muslim world, has betrayed its own principles and does not, in fact, represent the will of the people as the democratic ideal demands. Authoritarian governments take the worst of secularist doctrine and use it as a weapon against Islamists by equating Islam with fundamentalism and extremism and setting secularism as a prerequisite to democracy. \*xxxiii\*

#### V. SECULAR DISGUISE IN ZANZIBAR

Zanzibar is an integral part of the United Republic of Tanzania consisting of two major islands of Unguja and Pemba and all small Islands surrounding them. \*\*xxxiv\* Historically, the population of Zanzibar is a multiracial and multi-ethnic in nature, with a Muslim majority. Nevertheless, the Muslim numerical strength is estimated at over 96% with the majority (90%) of them subscribing to Sunni Islam. \*\*xxv\* As a result, Islam has played a crucial role in the cultural development of the Zanzibari society since the beginning of the last century. \*\*xxxvi\*

The strong cultural and political influence of Islam in Zanzibar may be inference from the fact that all Islamic celebrations are recognized as national holidays. In particular, the month of Ramadhan is recognized by the State as a holy month. Although the state has the role of "guardian of religion" under the constitution, xxxvii Zanzibar has no specific law banning eating in public until late afternoon during Ramadan.

It is widely held that Islam arrived in Zanzibar even before the establishment of the Oman Arab sultanate under the leadership of Seyyid Said bin Sultan who made Zanzibar his administrative headquarters in 1832. \*\*xxxviii\*\* As an Islamic dominion, the sultanate introduced an Islamic judiciary system (Kadhi courts) that operated until 1890 when Zanzibar was declared a British protectorate, giving way for the introduction of the European common laws in the country. Under British rule, Kadhi courts were retained and mandated to address family law cases involving the local Muslims, whereas the secular law courts presided other aspects of the law involving both Muslims and non-Muslim members of the society. \*\*xxxix\*\*

Like other parts of Africa that witnessed the fall of colonialism, Zanzibar attained its independence from the British in December 1963, which was followed by the bloody revolution of January 1964, culminating to the overthrowing of the sultanate rule. This development paved the way for the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) forming a Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, which ultimately joined the country to Tanganyika forming a new nation, Tanzania, in April 1964. xl

The first Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar under the leadership of President Abeid Amani Karume (1964 – 1972) maintained the *Kadhi* courts' jurisdiction to family matters despite calls for expanding the mandates of the court. xii

Similarly, Zanzibar as a part of Tanzania, embraces secular principles, which is slightly different from the one practiced in Tanzania mainland due to the histories. Despite being a secular state, the Zanzibar government has allowed the existence of religious based institutions maintained by the state and they include *Kadhi* courts, *Wakf* commission, and *Mufti* office. The President of Zanzibar appoints the heads of the three institutions, which are not constitutionally recognised in mainland Tanzania. XIII

According to the country's constitution, the Chief Kadhi together with his deputy are supposed to be appointed by the president of the country. As an institution of the state, the Kadhi courts are part of the country's judiciary system, and like other judiciary officers, *Kadhis* also draw salaries from the government thereby required to work under the supervision of the Chief Justice of Zanzibar. Even though the courts are found in almost every district in the country, the jurisdiction of the Kadhi courts in contemporary Zanzibar is limited to social matters of Muslims, which is aptly captured in the Kadhi's Court Act of 2017: xliv

5 (1) The Kadhi's Court shall have exclusive jurisdiction over all matters and proceedings between parties who are Muslims relating to:

- a) marriage, divorce and other related issues;
- b) personal status;
- c) maintenances and custody of children;
- d) wakf or religious charitable trusts, grants, and gifts inter vivo;
- e) wills and inheritance;
- f) division of matrimonial asserts if there is actual contribution; and
- g) any other matter in respect of which jurisdiction is conferred to Kadhi's court by any written law.

Another Islamic institution that operates under the umbrella of the government is the Wakf and Trust Property Commission (WTPC), mandated to oversee the preservation of trust properties and distribution of inheritance to the rightful heirs. The commission's other roles such as the registration of mosques and *madrasas*, organizing pilgrimage to Mecca, receiving and distributing donations to needy Muslims in the country, and the management of endowments are the commonly known functions by the public because they affect many people. xlv The Wakf and Trust Commission Act of 2007 while displaying functions of the commission posits:

The commission shall have the following functions:

- (a) To administer:
  - (i) Wakf property;

- (ii) Trust property; and
- (iii) Estate of deceased Muslim.
- (b) To coordinate Hajj activities in relation to pilgrims from Zanzibar and to regulate individuals, firms or associations providing travel and other service to pilgrims;
- (c) To coordinate and regulate the provision, collection and distribution of zakkas and other charitable gifts provisions and offerings for religious purposes or cause:
- (d) To coordinate national Idd prayers and Idd Baraza.

Similar to the *Wakf* commission and the *Kadhi* court is the Mufti institution whose office bearer is appointed also by the state following its establishment in 2001 upon the passing of the *Mufti* Law. Some of its core functions are to settle Muslim religious disputes, sanction Islamic activities, supervise mosques, and to approve religious lectures, and importation of Islamic literatures among others. This is clearly shown in the Mufti Act section 9 of 2001amendments: Ironically in mainland Tanzania, the *Mufti* is not a state employee, but rather elected by the National Muslim Council of Tanzania (*Baraza Kuu la Waislamu Tanzania – BAKWATA*).

However, it also brought to the fore new challenges, including the intricacy of defining the nature of the state along religious-secular dimensions. In contrast, a pre-dominantly Muslim Zanzibar was inclined to set up a semi secular state. Although Islam was not constitutionally identified as an official religion of the state, it was accorded a special status, including the teaching of Islamic knowledge and Arabic language in public schools as well as the continuation of the *Kadhi* courts to deal with personal affairs such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance cases of Muslims.

From all indications, the Zanzibar government has encouraged Islamic tendencies to the extent that Muslim programs occupy more airspace in the national radio and television broadcasting. This special treatment is evident with the *adhan* (call for prayers), the Friday prayers, the *Iddul-Fitr* (a holiday celebrated after the fasting month - Ramadhan) and the *Iddul-Hajj* (a holiday celebrated after the pilgrimage), which are all transmitted live by the national broadcaster. To further demonstrate their sensitivity to Muslim sensibilities, the government has declared the month of *Ramadhan* as sacred thereby outlawing bars and hotels to operate in the day, closing of public schools, and reduction of working hours during the fasting period.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up the topic, the Tanzania constitution outlines: "The United Republic is a democratic, secular and socialist state which adheres to multi-party democracy," <sup>li</sup> It is clear that Tanzania includes Zanzibar adopts a policy of secularism; however, Tanzanians are free to worship whatever they believe in. On other hand, Zanzibar constitution states: "Zanzibar shall be a state that adheres to the principles of democracy and social Justice," As revealed earlier in this

study, the main principle of secular state is separation of state and religious beliefs; nevertheless, Zanzibar tends to act otherwise as evident when speaking about *Wakf, Kadhi*, and *Mufti* offices. It is also contrary to the expressions conveyed by both constitutions that they advocate for adoption of secularism and socialism.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Secularism is an ideology, which bestows to the state the freedom to deal with its affairs without interference from religious authorities. It is observed that secularism does not favour or negate any specific religion to the extent that several constitutions in the world today have adopted this policy advocated by secularism. We have seen that the policy of secularism advocates among the things equality before the law regardless religions guided by the common laws.

Within the Islamic country, secularism was introduced to Islamic state by the European contact. One of the first Islamic countries to fall into the hands of the secularists is Turkey, which was the centre of political power for the Islamic world. Christians in cooperation with the Jews had worked to bring about the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1920. Some scholars perceive secularism as a long run struggle between Islam and *Jâhiliyyah* (ignorance) in a new façade.

Though Tanzania declared itself to be a democratic, secular and socialist state, some religious elements impede the system particularly the integral part of Zanzibar where a great number of Muslims is found. Zanzibar the integral part of the United Republic of Tanzania is proud of the principles of democracy and social Justice; however, it admitted religious institutions both constitutionally and officially to operate in the government contrary to the principles of a secular state. To that extent, it is obvious that Zanzibar is not a hundred percent secular but it is a religious secular state. <sup>liii</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

vi Ibid. p. 28.

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