

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

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The Muslim MP is a disappearing entity

In his remarks on the Women's Reservation Bill, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) president, Asaduddin Owaisi, lit a candle on the need to have a quota for Muslim women within the 33% reservation for women. Amidst the din in the House, the flicker went out soon, and gone with the wind was the need to increase the representation of women of India's largest minority in Parliament. In the passage of 17 Lok Sabhas so far, there have been just a handful of Muslim women. Mr. Owaisi said, "There have been 690 women MPs elected to Lok Sabha, and only 25 of them have come from the Muslim community."

Fading representation

The community needs a lantern more than a candle. The Muslim community, and not just its women, has been severely under-represented in the Lower House. Since Independence, Muslim representation has been far below the community's share in the general population of the country. According to the last Census in 2011, the Muslim population stood at a little over 14% of the total though the whispers which abound in the corridors of power, and the noises from the election campaign of many right-wing leaders, place it much higher. Some even peg it at around 20% in an obvious bid to perpetuate the myth of a Muslim population explosion.

That might just be a dog whistle, but even if one uses the figure in the last Census, the Muslim community ought to have at least 73 Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha by the principle of proportional representation. The figure has never been reached, the highest being scaled in 1980 when 49 candidates cutting across party lines reached the Lok Sabha. It was the year the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was just born, with the Jan Sangh being consigned to history.

The reality makes grim reading. Since the first general election, the community has had on average only 27 Members of Parliament in the Lower House. In 2014, when everything was swept aside by a hurricane called Narendra Modi, the figure tapered off to its lowest – 23 MPs – less than half of the figure reached in 1980. The ruling party had no Muslim representative in the House.

In 2019, Muslim fortunes improved ever so slightly with the election of 25 MPs which, incidentally, was also the first time since



Ziya Us Salam

Independence that the ruling party had no Muslim MP in either House of Parliament. Today, we have States which have never elected a Muslim MP just as there are States which have not elected one for more than three decades. For instance, the last Muslim to make it to the Lok Sabha from Gujarat was the late Congress leader Ahmed Patel who won in 1984 despite the fact that Muslims bring up a little under 10% of the State's population.

In neighbouring Rajasthan, there has been only one Muslim MP since 1952 – Capt. Ayub Khan who won, in 1984 and 1991. Similarly, when the AIMIM's Imtiaz Jaleel won from Aurangabad in 2019, he became the first Muslim MP from Maharashtra since A.R. Antulay won in 2004. In Madhya Pradesh, the scene is similar. The vanishing Muslim MP phenomenon has been accentuated by the success of the BJP, a party which has exercised extreme economy in ticket distribution to Muslim candidates.

But it is not limited to the BJP. In the elections in 2019, many regional parties did not have even a single Muslim candidate in the fray. In Tamil Nadu, both the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam did not put up a single Muslim candidate. It was the same with the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (now the Bharat Rashtra Samithi) in Telangana and the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh. The Aam Aadmi Party contested 35 seats across India, with only one given to a Muslim candidate.

Of course, things were different with the Uttar Pradesh-Bihar-Bengal belt. Here the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party-Rashtriya Janata Dal and Trinamool put up eight, 38, five and 12 candidates, respectively. Interestingly, even then, both the Samajwadi Party and the All India Trinamool Congress registered a significant decline in the number of Muslim candidates in comparison to 2014 when they had put up 36 and 21 candidates, respectively. It reinforced the belief that the Muslim MP is a disappearing entity, one who in the absence of political will, might just vanish altogether.

On reservation

It is not just about the absence of appropriate representation in recent years; the whole electoral system, deliberately or willy-nilly, seems loaded against the community. There are classic

cases of seat reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC) from townships where they comprise only a little over 10% and Muslims are much higher in numbers. Karimganj in Assam has 52% Muslim population and 13% Scheduled Castes but the seat until recently was reserved for the latter.

In a country where political parties take caste and religion into account before ticket distribution, it automatically dims the prospects of Muslim representation; a seat where a Muslim candidate stood a realistic chance of being the first past the post is reserved for an SC. Certain seats are demarcated in a way which makes the Muslim vote redundant; the vote being neatly divided into half between the two constituencies, as we have seen in the latest demarcation of seats in Assam where Muslim-dominated seats have come down from 29 to 22, thanks to a merger of seats and a redrawing of the electoral map.

This lopsided representation puts not only Muslims at a loss but also projects our polity in a not-so-favourable light. The Muslim voice is in danger of being completely silenced. Back in the 1980s, when the Shah Bano case was the talk of town, did we hear any Muslim woman MP speaking on her? More recently, when Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad introduced the triple talaq Bill in 2019, the ruling party had no Muslim woman to participate in the debate. Surely, a Muslim woman defending the ruling dispensation on triple talaq would have sent out the right signals.

The last straw

The story was repeated in the debate on the Women's Reservation Bill. Predictably, the ruling party did not have any Muslim voice. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi too talked about Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes but amnesia overcame him when it came to Muslims. The worst was reserved for the end in the form of the communal slur-laden diatribe of BJP MP Ramesh Bidhuri against Bahujan Samaj Party MP (Amroha) Kunwar Danish Ali. It sent out a strong message: not only is it difficult for a Muslim to be elected to the Lok Sabha, but his opponents would also rather not have him in the House. It is time to hold a candle to not just the Bidhuris but also to a system which has almost made the Muslim MP invisible.

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A war that ends the Saudi-Israel 'normalisation' process

As Hamas launched its lethal attacks on Israel on October 7, the assault has firmly overturned Israeli efforts, supported by the United States, to promote a normalisation of relations with Arab states without conceding anything to the Palestinians. Specifically, the Gaza war has dealt a mortal blow to the efforts for Saudi Arabia to normalise ties with Israel.

On September 22, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was at his arrogant and triumphalist best as he waved two maps to embellish his speech at the United Nations General Assembly: one depicted an isolated Israel in 1948, while the other showed Arab neighbours that now had peace agreements with Israel – Egypt, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Jordan. It also showed all the occupied Palestinian territories – the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem – as integral parts of Israel. Mr. Netanyahu specifically applauded the normalisation process with Saudi Arabia under U.S. auspices, and insisted that the Palestinians should have no veto over the process.

U.S.-backed diplomacy

Mr. Netanyahu's remarks reflected the flurry of diplomatic activity over the last few months between Washington, Tel Aviv and Riyadh as U.S. officials pushed for diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, possibly within this year. American and Israeli officials publicly affirmed that the broad contours of the agreement have been finalised. Meanwhile, two Israeli Ministers visited Saudi Arabia for international conferences, signifying increasing bonhomie between the two countries.

The normalisation deal had hinged on three conditions that the kingdom had placed before the U.S.: U.S. approval for a civilian nuclear programme that provides for uranium enrichment within the country; an "iron-clad" U.S. security guarantee for the country, and sales of advanced weapons. The Americans were said to be insisting that Saudi Arabia back U.S. interests on oil prices, dilute its political, military and technological ties with China and deepen strategic engagement with the U.S.



Talmiz Ahmad
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Saudi Arabia has recognised that peace and stability in the region are not possible without Palestinian interests being addressed

Saudi Arabia's three conditions for normalisation were contentious in Israel and the U.S. Several U.S. politicians opposed the idea of giving security guarantees to an authoritarian state. They also warned the U.S. President against Saudi Arabia developing its own nuclear programme, believing that it poses an unacceptable proliferation risk – a concern shared in Israel as well. There were also obstacles to the U.S. sales of advanced weapons, largely due to Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record at home and in Yemen. Finally, there were concerns about Saudi insistence that arms supplies be accompanied by a transfer of technology to develop its arms industry. Despite these obstacles, the U.S. was confident the deal would go through.

Palestinian interests and concerns did not figure in these normalisation discussions. Given the extremist political coalition that Mr. Netanyahu heads, there was no interest in Israel to give even lip service to Palestinian aspirations for a sovereign and viable state or accept East Jerusalem as the capital of that state. In fact, Mr. Netanyahu was not even willing to promise freezing settlements in the West Bank, deferring annexation, or dismantling illegal outposts.

At that time, hundreds of Israel's religious zealots, backed by Mr. Netanyahu's Ministers, made provocative incursions into the Al-Aqsa complex, while the settlers in the West Bank increased violence against their Palestinian neighbours, usually with the support of the security forces.

Saudi-Iran ties

The Gaza war has once again placed the Palestinian issue at the centre of West Asian politics. Some writers are blaming Iran, arguing that the Islamic Republic has instigated the Hamas attacks to block Saudi Arabia's normalisation initiative with Israel. This argument has little credibility. Saudi-Iran ties have already been normalised under Chinese mediation: embassies have been re-opened in both capitals, high-level visits have been exchanged and economic cooperation is being expanded.

Now, following the Hamas attacks, the kingdom has recognised that peace and stability in the region are not possible without Palestinian interests being addressed. In an official statement, the Saudi Foreign Office has recalled the kingdom's "repeated warnings of the dangers of the explosion of the situation as a result of the occupation, the deprivation of the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights and the repetition of systematic provocations of its sanctities". This statement is referring to the abuses countenanced by the Netanyahu government – desecration of the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex and settlement expansion and settler violence in the West Bank. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has now asserted that the kingdom will "stand by the Palestinian people to achieve their legitimate rights to a decent life, achieve their hopes and aspirations, and achieve just and lasting peace".

Palestinian interests in focus

Again, the Saudis have abandoned recourse to insincere verbal assurances to the Palestinians that were under consideration during the normalisation negotiations. The search now is for concrete action to serve Palestinian interests, as the Saudi journalist, Faisal Abbas, has written: "... the international community must act now to activate a credible peace plan that enables a two-state solution".

Looking ahead, it has been obvious over the last three years that the kingdom had shrugged off the American yoke and was pursuing its foreign policy engagements in terms of its own interests, without any U.S. involvement. The kingdom rejects the U.S. interest in building an anti-China coalition globally and an anti-Iran cabal regionally.

Again, regardless of the U.S.'s wishes there is no question of Saudi Arabia accommodating the Americans on oil prices or diluting its comprehensive strategic ties with China. They exemplify its assertion of strategic autonomy and are an integral part of its quest for diverse, multifaceted, and substantial ties across Asia. Promoting the Palestinian cause will now form an important part of this foreign policy approach.