

# Imam Haron and “the ragged trousered philanthropists”

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WHEN we read about the rapid increase in white collar crime taking place in South Africa and to what extent corruption has become the order of the day, we could ask the hypothetical question: what would Imam Abdullah Haron have said about the current state of affairs?

From our insight into his life, we may conclude that he would have withdrawn from public life as a politician if he had been a South African parliamentarian or, for that matter, a local Cape Town councillor.

And as an ordinary citizen in this neo-liberal democratic society, he would have continued to unfailingly serve his community with the purpose of assisting them to overcome poverty. He would have lent a hand to those who suffered from the xenophobic violence that reached unspeakable heights during the past few months.

We assert that he would have rejected the idea that the government continues to allow the appointment of more than one family member of holding public office in the national cabinet (for example, the Pahad brothers) or provincial government, as witnessed at present.

We assume that he would have used the masjid's pulpit to continue to speak out against nepotism and the inequalities that still exist.

He would have openly spoken out against the manipulation of the economic power by the elite groups that have become filthy rich at the expense of the poor; he would have aired his views against the “Travelgate” scandal that still haunts South Africans; and he would have condemned the racist acts that continue to plague the country.

And we guess that he would not have kept quiet about the hefty pay cheque that the governor of South Africa's Reserve Bank recently received, nor would he have remained silent about the despicable bonuses and golden-handshakes that company executives received and continue to collect amidst the rising tide of poverty in different parts of the country.

And we contend that he would have remained devoted to the cause of the unemployed, the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed, without compromising his basic principles.

In response to our assumptions about the imam who sacrificed his life for the freedom and equality for all, a question might be posed: on what basis do we make these claims?

We base our understanding on the belief that the Imam was fully informed about the fundamental principles of Islam that espouse universal values such as justice, fairness and honesty.

And we firmly believe that these principles were uppermost in his mind when he threw in his lot with the liberation movements and participated in the struggle against the destruction of apartheid in South Africa and all forms of injustices in the capitalist and communist worlds.

He did this in spite of the criticisms that he got from some of his co-religionists/ fellow theologians who held the view that if one is not satisfied with the status quo then it is best to emigrate instead of voicing one's view against the system via the pulpit.

We also base our argument on the fact that certain reading materials had been circulated among members of the organisation that he spearheaded: the Claremont



Muslim Youth Association (1959-1965) and study circle – the Ibadur-Rahman Study Group (1966-1969), which he supervised.

Two circulated works that come to mind are Sayyid Qutb's (d. 1966) *Social Justice in Islam* and Robert Tressell's (d. 1911) *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Panther Books)

In this short essay, although our interest is to briefly discuss the last-mentioned novel, it will, however, not be out of place if we share a few words about the works of Sayyid Qutb, the prominent and well-known Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue who has been vilified by modern, western scholars such as Paul Berman who called him ‘the philosopher of Islamic terrorism’, and characterised by scholars such as Ume Bhatia as ‘the ideological guide of modern militant Islamism’.

Qutb was hanged by the Nasr regime for his uncompromising stand against Egypt's policies towards Islam, on the one hand, and the people, on the other.

Despite Egypt's socialist agenda, it did not ensure freedom and justice for its people, and individuals such as Qutb were aware of this and spoke out against the regime's injustices. Nasr considered this an affront and he, therefore, muzzled the oppositional voices such as Qutb and others.

However, Qutb, who was a novelist, poet and literary critic used his skills to express his feelings by writing numerous popular tracts such as Milestones as well as his popular exegesis titled *In the Shade of the Qur'an*.

The popular tract mentioned was penned with the idea of offering guidelines for Muslims living in a society that has been deeply affected by (western) unbelief that

comes in various forms.

The exegesis, which was co-translated by Adil Salahi and Ashur Shamis (the latter being the son-in-law of Imam Haron and the translator of Madiba's *A Long Walk to Freedom*), was written while he was incarcerated in Nasr's prison for about 10 years before finally being hanged by Nasr.

Qutb's commentary, which targeted the broad Muslim audience, is meant to stir the religious sensibilities of the Muslims who have been caught up in imitating western culture without realising the influence that it has on the Muslims' psyche and outlook.

Regrettably, Qutb's critics stress the two mentioned works but do not unpack the contents of *Social Justice in Islam* that underlines and undergirds the essence of social justice in contemporary society. In fact, his views as contained in his book resonate with the ideas found in Tressell's compelling book.

Reading Tressell's gripping and persuasive novel is a work that all and sundry (except the filthy rich) would readily identify with and would prescribe as an essential reader in schools that advocate ‘social justice’ in the true sense of the word and not neo-liberalism that emphasise individual freedom at the expense of communal freedom.

We can gather more-or-less from the title what the novel is all about. The book revolves around the lives of a bunch of ‘ragged trousered philanthropists’. Each of them hail from different backgrounds and eke out a living without being able to qualitatively improve their social lives because of the external factors that hinder them from achieving this.

Owen, the book's main protagon-

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onist, makes ample effort to enlighten his fellow workers about the positive dimension of socialism. He informs them how this ideology is able to level the social playing fields and that they would be able to alleviate their inequalities and overcome the existing injustices that permeate the lives of their community.

Despite Owen's valiant attempts, his fellow workers do not take heed and he thus chooses to refer to them as ‘philanthropists’ – those benefactors in ragged trousers who are more than “willing to hand over their labour to their employers and the rich”.

In their laymen opinion, they consider their station in life as masons, carpenters, glaziers and other related ‘professions’ to be ‘the natural order of things’ and since this is the case, they do not object to the rich exploiting them, nor do they voice their opinion against the system that perpetuates this type of behaviour.

They, in fact, adopt a fatalistic ‘it's not for the likes of us’ attitude that does not permit them to interfere in the social structure to bring about the necessary socio-economic changes.

Apart from detesting the social class structures of Tressell's Edwardian society at the turn of the 20th century, he grieved for the poverty of his people – a character trait of all those who side and support the oppressed and suppressed.

Returning to South Africa, where communities, sadly, still experience injustice in parts of the country such as Khutsong, and poverty in many rural areas such as Taung, it is difficult not to identify with the ideas expressed by Qutb and Tressell.

In fact, when we look at the individuals who were Imam Haron's companions, we observe that all of them came from a working-class background, which Tressell highlights in his book.

Imam's brothers-in-law, Abdul-Kareem and Cassiem Sadan, were brick-layers; some of his friends such as Ismail Saban, Abu Bakr Fakier and Sedick Galant were trained teachers. A few of his fellow theologians were salespersons.

Although the Imam's life was, to some extent, influenced by his interaction with these groups of people, he also relied on his own readings and insights into socio-political and economic life. He himself experienced unemployment on at least one occasion and thus could identify with some of Tressell's characters.

In fact, though Tressell's novel was first published in 1965, it soon gained a wide readership in the English-speaking world where the destitution of the working class was quite evident and, in

some instances, widespread.

And we suspect that it was Abu Bakr Fakier who brought the book to the Study Circle's attention since he was an avid reader.

Cassiem Sadan, for example, had much to say about the book's contents because he readily identified with the characters who were ordinary workers not prepared to upset the status quo as long as they were able to cover their basic needs and live decent lives.

In fact, Cassiem Sadan, who greatly admired Imam Haron and Abu Bakr Fakier, never adopted a fatalistic approach and engaged his fellow workers in ‘intellectual’ discussions unheard of in worker circles.

Cassiem Sadan always critically questioned the behaviour of the Muslims and their religious leaders who were too afraid to raise their voices against the apartheid system's racial policies and practices. He, at all times, mentioned the principled stand the Imam took on socio-political and economic issues and the Imam's ability to tackle complex theological issues.

To conclude, the mentioned readings have undoubtedly played a significant role in the education of the Imam and his support group in the CMYA and Study Circle. This demonstrates that although the Imam regularly consulted Islam's primary sources for guidance, he never wavered when relevant reading material was recommended to him and his group.

He was open to all sorts of ideas as long as they beefed up their educational programme with material that could shed light on various issues that would help improve the lives of the oppressed.

Both Qutb and Tressell's works were (and still are) relevant to the South African context. It was, therefore, not surprising that these became recommended, if not prescribed, materials among South Africa's Muslim youth in the 1960s (and later).

We suppose that this method of learning will assist us to remain constantly aware of the plight of the have-nots.

When we view the contemporary scene in South Africa and elsewhere, we find that the haves continue to benefit and have, of course, become richer and that the have-nots still wallow in their poverty.

We are certain that Imam and others who have sacrificed their lives for a just cause would be highly dissatisfied – as we are – with the present status quo in South Africa.

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