

## SAYYID QUTB'S SOCIO-POLITICAL THOUGHT

### Introduction

The twentieth century Muslim world has witnessed several scholars and intellectuals whose writings made a great impact on succeeding generations of Muslims especially the Muslim youths. Their writings have moulded and shaped a new comprehensive Islamic vision and they responded to the ideas and doctrines that emerged as a result of the process of secularisation and modernization of Muslims. It is believed that a few Muslim thinkers have contributed to the reformulation of contemporary Islamic thought, including Sayyid Qutb. The aim of this article is to present an analytical study of the socio-political thought of Sayyid Qutb, a political reformer, an analyst, a socio-political thinker and a world known Islamic revivalist of the twentieth century, whose influence is deep and pervasive in contemporary Islamic movements. His thought has undoubtedly drawn the attention of several people, for he boldly and uncompromisingly asserted his viewpoints regardless of consequences

Since Sayyid Qutb's contribution especially to the field of socio-political thought has captured the imagination and commitment of the young Muslims all over the world and transformed them into committed workers and agents of change in the cause of Islam, it is appropriate to evaluate and analyse his socio-political views on modern issues. It is also relevant to evaluate his theory of contemporary society in which he has made a division of society into Islamic and Jhiliyyah. In addition, his definition of the Islamic society produced utmost dissatisfaction to the ruling classes because their ideals and systems were not in line with his definition. It seems that he had doubts about allowing Muslims knowing Islam from non-Islamic sources. It is therefore imperative to study his opinion of Muslims seeking knowledge of Islam from the Western scholars.

The paper comprises two sections. The first section of this paper deals with Sayyid Qutb's views on major contemporary political ideologies. The second section is devoted to his interpretation of the theory of contemporary society that drew the attention of millions of people the world over. Through the study made, it is possible to conclude that the political thought of Sayyid Qutb is almost synonymous with the thought and vision of Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood movement of Egypt. This is quite obvious from the scholars' writings on Sayyid Qutb's life and thought which is manifest from Yusuf al-'A'am's report that when Sayyid Qutb's *al-'Adlah al-Ijtim'iyah f wal-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam) was published, Hasan al-Banna, holding the book in his hand, proclaimed in public that "this is our thought and it is probable that the author of the book is one of us."<sup>1</sup>

Westerners and Easterners acknowledge Sayyid Qutb's influence on contemporary Islamic revival and movements. He has been considered one of the most distinguished contemporary thinkers, and numerous titles have been bestowed on him. Asaf Husayn considers him as "the ideologue of the Ikhwn,<sup>2</sup>" Haddad as "the most noted advocate of the interpretation of Islam as revolution,<sup>3</sup>" President Anwar Sdt of Egypt as "an eminent leader of the Brethren,<sup>4</sup>" Abu'l Hasan 'Al wal-Nadw as "one of Islam's new crusaders,

a great author and scholar,<sup>5</sup> Badrul Hasan as “matchless writer,<sup>6</sup>” Muhammad Barakat as “the only thinker who enjoys purity in intellectual methodology and straightforwardness in action,<sup>7</sup>” ‘Abbs Maḥ-mūd ‘Abd Allah as “one of the greatest thinkers of contemporary Islamic thought,<sup>8</sup>” Mahdi Faḥl Allah as “the most famous personality in the Muslim world in the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup>” Muhammad Qutb as “the revolutionary of contemporary Islamic thought,<sup>10</sup>” and Oliver Carre as “le Grand inspireur de ce nouveau soufflé,<sup>11</sup>” (“the great inspiration for a new revival).

Sayyid Qutb makes a deep and comprehensive analysis of the implications of various political ideologies and philosophies of contemporary society which are considered by Islamic movements extremely harmful to all communities of the world including the Islamic Ummah. As pointed out by Hasan al-Banna, the goals of man-made ideologies would eventually corrupt the spiritual life of humanity, besides paving the way for egoism, parochialism and perplexity. As a consequence, human beings would only live in turbulence and constant discord.

Sayyid Qutb also reached the same conclusion on the contemporary ideologies, as did Hasan al-Banna. Sayyid Qutb pointed out the fallacies and shortcomings as well as pros and cons of these ideologies. In his writings he cites many references and provides well-reasoned arguments which are acceptable to any intellectual group of the contemporary age. His convincing methodology with reference to divine revelation is remarkable.

Hasan al-Banna showed great concern towards the poor, downtrodden and destitute sections of Egyptian society in particular. He put forward many suggestions to the government to raise the living standard of the people, in particular workers and peasants. Similarly, Sayyid Qutb also showed great interest in enhancing the quality of life and provided practical solutions in his writings. He blamed feudal lords for exploitation of the Egyptian poor. Therefore, first of all, it is ideal to discuss the society in which he was breathing.

#### Sayyid Qutb and Egyptian Society

Sayyid Qutb observed keenly the inner social aspects and other dimensions of Egypt, which surfaced at the end of the first half of the twentieth century. He observed the fragility of socialists and politicians who were solely responsible for creating antagonism and disorder among the masses. The society in which he lived accorded special respect to social class. Rather it is stated that the Egyptians continued their days with confidence on this distinction. It has gone away from the spirit of human civilisation. It did not agree with the spirit of any religion. The notion of Egyptian life was entirely unethical and the spirit of the masses had gone astray and was ruined. It also annihilated the genuine emotions of human beings. It implies that the common people did not find pertinent opportunity to distinguish right and wrong due to the sophisticated thinking of the society that dominated the majority of destitute. It also devastated human conscience. There was

lack of genuine, mutual give- and- take understanding. This trend added fuel for causing drought and famine in Egypt. It paved the way for the death of millions of poor people. The wealth and the lands were monopolised by upper classes, which resulted in devastation and economic crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Sayyid Qutb divides Egyptian society into two classes. Firstly, the capitalist class which lived in luxury and did not do any fruitful work. This group lived at the expense of the labours of the vast majority of people. This dominant group had no link with the religion or the nation. It joined hands with the West and pierced the very goal of the Ummah. It comprised of feudal lords. The wealthy occupied key posts in government, political life and the military. This class also owned half of the cultivable land in the country. It sucked the blood of the poor. It is said that more than one third of the national income was devoured by these people, in spite of the fact that their number did not exceed a couple of thousands.<sup>13</sup>

According to Sayyid Qutb, the second class comprised the poor and downtrodden, the labouring class. It consisted of workers, peasants, feudal slaves, unemployed and others. The overwhelming majority of them were from the rural areas. They always engaged in work. Neither mercy nor benevolence was shown to this group and their efforts were being exploited and utilised by the first group composed of feudal lords. This group was an exploited and unfortunate group.<sup>14</sup>

Sayyid Qutb attempted to banish such an ill-fated society from the soil of Egypt through his articles and reform endeavours. For this purpose, he called on the people to fight against colonialism and feudalism. He also urged them to be conscious of the new trends, which were emerging among them, so that they might save themselves from being carried away by the destructive ideologies and tactics of these proponents. He wept after seeing the society and explored the possibilities to safeguard it from destruction.<sup>15</sup>

### Political Thought

Sayyid Qutb considered the ideology of socialism as the worst enemy of mankind and particularly the philosophy of communism.<sup>16</sup> Some authors say that he was in favour of communism. Some others say that he was somewhat liberal towards it. But it is a wrong and incorrect conclusion, rather a deliberate attempt to ruin his reputation. Sayyid Qutb asserted the ideology of capitalism as one of the enemies of mankind, because it gradually exploited the people through various stages and means.<sup>17</sup> Some of the writers observed him resisting the people's thinking of nationalism, ethnocentrism and even biased patriotism that paved the way for egoism, chauvinism and parochialism. Since Islam is a universal religion, it is not restricted by geographical boundaries. If nationalistic feelings and ethnic sentiments are permitted to exist, they will certainly put an end to the universal thinking of Islam. That is why Sayyid Qutb considers such notions irrelevant, even antagonistic to the Islamic unity. For, nationalism confines the thinking of the people within the borders and interests of the nation, thus generating national consciousness and loyalty at the expense of Islamic Ummatic solidarity and monotheistic faith.

The fact is that Sayyid Qutb never supported man-made ideologies, which deny the existence of God, the supernatural power that is transcendent. These ideologies, according to him, lacked spiritual and moral dimensions. They passed through a process of metamorphosis and spiritual corruption. It can be noted from their failure to solve the problems on the humanitarian ground. Sayyid Qutb criticised the ideology of communism due to its treating the people as robots. He also attacked it for not providing freedom and liberty to the subjects to exercise their free will of choosing any way of life or religion. He believed that people of the twentieth century knocked at the door of all ideologies and eventually realised deficiency and shortcomings in them. A time would come when all those who knocked at these doors would certainly turn back and realise the need for total change. At this juncture they would find peace and harmony only in Islam. Of course, he reflected on different issues. A brief discussion is made in the following section in order to evaluate his socio-political thought.

According to Sayyid Qutb, parochial nationalistic thinking came into existence a couple of centuries ago.<sup>18</sup> As far as contemporary society is concerned, it was misguided by the influence of the past events. All ideologies and movements that originated from them had also lost their vitality. In short, all man-made individual and collective theories and hypotheses have proved to be a total failure. The concept of social justice, though much talked about, has been absolutely violated and neglected for centuries. People are treated as toys. They are forced to dance to the tune of their political masters.

Nationalism, for instance, transformed Europe from a feudal system into a nation-state system. In this sense, it is interpreted by some scholars that it has had positive effects on Europe, which used nationalism to free itself from the control of the church. But Sayyid Qutb's argument is correct in terms of the Muslim nations which followed nationalism. The Muslims, who are of different ethnic groups, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds, Berbers, and so forth, could have been one state of approximately 800 million. But because of the division of the Muslim world by the colonising powers and then the rise of nationalism and its acceptance of this division, Muslims have been split into many states. Sayyid Qutb views this step as a deterioration that has weakened and left them powerless. Not only do Muslims live in different states but also many times these states fight each other in the name of Arabism, Islam, or other causes. Most Arab and Turkish leaders and heads of state have attempted to relegate Islam to a secondary role and to encourage nationalistic feelings, which ultimately oppose Islamic teachings. These leaders might have served the countries concerned as instruments to free their land. But from an Islamic point of view, whether they advocate linguistic nationalism, racial nationalism, cultural nationalism, or a combination, these leaders cannot be commended because nationalism considers the duty to land and people over any other duty, even to God.<sup>19</sup>

While expressing his views about the political thought, Sayyid Qutb divides the world into three blocs, namely the Western Bloc, the Eastern Bloc and the Neutral Bloc. Both Western and Eastern Blocs, he argues, have competed with each other to dominate the whole world, whereas the third bloc was forced to remain impotent and insignificant in all respects. The proclamation of parochial and chauvinistic nationalism on the basis of

ethnocentrism, like Arab nationalism, in practice did not fit into the agenda of the big powers. Some nations did not find a slot in the third bloc and they were compelled to associate themselves eventually with either of the two main blocs to save themselves from the iniquities of these Blocs.<sup>20</sup>

As far as the school of Neutralism is concerned, it is an ideology, which is not ostensible and has no distinguishing marks because it is not based on nature. It represents artificiality in its transactions as felt by Sayyid Qutb. This bloc currently represents what is called the neutral pocket or the pocket of Afro-Asia that is an incoherent artificial bloc. It has no particular ideology that would unite the people. It has no unique history nor is there a common goal. It is being despised, especially on the international scene. Its members like India and Pakistan, though champions of this school always involve themselves in war, particularly due to their dispute over Kashmir.<sup>21</sup> In such a neutralist association of non-aligned nations, there is no room for peace. Therefore, it is also faced with failure in its aspiration for a strong international identity.

According to Sayyid Qutb, the capitalistic system, also called the democratic system, stood behind at the early period, played its role in favour of feudalism that enervated the dignity of Europeans and curbed their freedom. It also weakened and threatened the existence of human beings in all walks of life. Its profession of freedom for the individual and for enterprise has been eroded in practice. It exacted a high price for economic progress in exhausting the treasures of the world. It performed its greater role in monopoly and usury, which were responsible for all kinds of cyclical economic crisis, depression, stagnation of commerce, recession and neo-colonialism. Certainly, the system of Capitalism is an offensive system and unpleasant material. It exploits society at every place. In the capitalistic society, the entire wealth is controlled by a handful of feudal lords with the result that a part of the society is being neglected from possession and consequently they become serfs or bonded labourers to the feudal lords. Monopoly of wealth and property leads to economic depression and inflation, which were responsible for starvation, hunger, famine, drought and unrest.<sup>22</sup>

In the middle of the twentieth century the younger generation of Egyptians started changing their direction from Capitalism to Communism, because they at least found in the latter food, even though they did not find any spiritual element in it. The system of capitalistic economy had lost its vitality in the West. They moulded their mission and sciences especially in the field of economics under the influence of Socialism, as Mawdūd had rightly predicted that the West would not hesitate to follow the East in their day-to-day life.

Sayyid Qutb argues that the West always projected itself as a champion of freedom movements and a saviour of freedom. But in practice, it disregarded its doctrine and deceived the people. Innumerable examples can be cited in this context as far as the Arab Muslim problems are concerned. According to him, the Arab world has got every right to condemn the West for the denial of its freedom. The West projected itself as the champion of freedom and the enemy of slavery intellectually and politically. But France, despite its pronouncement of defending freedom by advocating and sponsoring the world

liberation movements, regarded the teaching of Arabic language and Islam as a crime in the Arab-Islamic countries such as Algeria. It detained the old, the children and the women of liberation movements in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.<sup>23</sup>

Sayyid Qutb states that Britain, which claimed to be the torchbearer of religious tolerance, prohibited the propagation of Islam in South Sudan and interdicted the existence of any Muslim community. It hurled the bodies of the wounded Egyptian commandos who were committed to liberate Suez Canal from foreign domination, to rapacious dogs till they ate their flesh. Such hostility and antagonism they had towards Muslims of Egypt in those days.<sup>24</sup>

Sayyid Qutb adds that the United States, the so-called saviour of democracy and freedom, permitted her white skinned citizens to lynch the Negro in public. During the Palestine war, when the problems of Egyptians were presented to the Security Council for discussion, it stood behind Israel and blocked Egypt's case from getting a fair hearing.<sup>25</sup> These are some of the historical facts mentioned by Sayyid Qutb in order to expose the cruelties of the Western capitalistic economic system that did harm to the entire humanity in various ways.

Sayyid Qutb does not appreciate and support the ideology of socialism and declares it to be very dangerous and harmful for humanity. According to him, it would never provide any benefit to mankind. He further asserts that democracy in the West had become sterile to such an extent that it was borrowing from the systems of the Eastern countries especially in the economic sphere. Instead of solving the problems of the people, it created confusion and led to crises in all spheres. Though it aimed at providing employment, shelter, health security and other possible incentives to individuals, it could not satisfy the basic needs of the people. Some of the programmes enforced by it, though they resemble some of the fundamental values of Islamic teaching, can never be accepted as a complete and comprehensive code of life, because of their very denial of the existence of God, the Supreme Power. In the final analysis, it sought asylum in the Western materialistic economy, which later tried to dominate the systems in all walks of life.<sup>26</sup> Mawdūd declares that Islam couldn't reconcile with any other ideologies that have been founded and moulded on the Western philosophical norms in order to serve their national and vested interests. He not only admonished the people but also cautioned the West for its cruel injection of such doctrines to the East under the guise of modernism, economic progress, liberalism, rationality and intellectualism. Sayyid Qutb also held the same view.

Sayyid Qutb was also critical of those nations which used the slogan of socialism to achieve their goals without realising the consequences of the slogan. Even some of the Arab countries adopted this slogan and derived inspiration from it, as Sayyid Qutb points out. Some mixed this with Islam and derived a new philosophy of life, namely "Islamic Socialism" which threatened the Arab world in the seventies and early eighties of the twentieth century. This trend shows the depth of ignorance of these rulers in respect of both Islamic and Western ideologies. They unconsciously propelled the masses into the ditch.

The emergence of a collective system was nothing but the reaction of the individual capitalistic system. The expected fruits and results were fundamentally and basically misappropriated. Sayyid Qutb believes that this collective system of life had been deduced from personal encroachment of the capitalistic system. The practical consequence of this ideology was that the basic needs of human beings were seen to be identical with those of animals, namely food and drink, clothing, shelter and sex. It also deprives people of their spiritual needs, which differentiate human beings from animals. Sayyid Qutb strongly believes that communism was the natural extension and evolution of the Western materialistic concept of life. The ideological goal had been expressed in terms of dialectical materialism based on material aspects of this world and the existence of material contradictions, which cause world evolution and revolution. This dogma promulgates a purely economic interpretation of history ascribing all developments in human life to the means of production. It has nothing but captivated the hearts of the poor and downtrodden, solving some of the temporal problems of life alone like provision for food, drink and work for all. Whoever possessed bread, freedom of speech and reasoning did not agree with this system even in the West. This way of life could not be disseminated in some countries, which strongly believed in and were committed to social justice. For example, Denmark and the United States can be noted among these, which have no confidence in this system of life.<sup>27</sup>

The ideology of communism for Sayyid Qutb has narrow limits. Whoever thinks deeply about the total welfare of a human being besides food and drink will not support the system. This ideology prospers only in a degenerate society or in a society which has become cowed as a result of some form of prolonged dictatorship. Generally it cannot get approval by a man who thinks twice about its origin and functions, because it believes in temporal aspects alone. For Sayyid Qutb, it is a materialistic doctrine injected into the minds of the poor. It reflects deep ignorance as far as the human spirit, and the higher concerns of life are concerned. Its arguments are based on the worldly needs of society but not on a comprehensive system that includes well-being both in this world and in the life hereafter. It has no spiritual source in it. The minds of the founders of this school were devoid of knowledge of the spirit. The conclusion of Sayyid Qutb on this research is genuine. He analysed the inner concepts and other dimensions of life. He did not leave anything untouched as others have done.<sup>28</sup>

Sayyid Qutb further says that communism attempts to abolish individualism, because, individualism is profound in playing a role in intellectual formation and spiritual effects of mankind. Not only this, it denies also the existence of God, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient and the Omnipresent. Further, Sayyid Qutb mentions that Marxist doctrine was nothing more than incomprehensible scientific fallacy. As for the police state that was established in Russia under its auspices, it harks back to the days of the Tsars. It can be imposed on backward nations for only a limited period of time, because people who are aware of their identity and historical background cannot tolerate it for long.<sup>29</sup>

The Marxist doctrine cannot survive except by coercion and in an atmosphere of

intimidation and suppression although the clique of the Communist party dominates over the administrative machinery and the state monopolizes all sources of gain and livelihood.<sup>30</sup> For Sayyid Qutb, today there are two basic ideologies challenging Islam: communism, on the one hand, and capitalism on the other. Islam itself is at the crossroads. Because of usury, monopoly, exploitation, and lack of justice, Sayyid Qutb refuses to view capitalism or the capitalist system as the model for Islam to imitate and follow. Moreover capitalism has been tied closely with nationalism where states like England, France, Italy, and Germany, in the name of national interest asserted the right to exploit others, invaded and occupied other countries in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. On the other hand, though socialism and Islam converge on many essential points such as in advocating guarantees of a minimum standard of life, work, housing, and social justice, Islamic economic system which is based on *Tawḥīd* is diametrically opposed to socialism.

Sayyid Qutb further goes on to say :“theoretically speaking Marxism is completely ignorant of the human soul, its nature and history, not to mention Marxism’s ignorance of the nature of existence and the interpretation of life and the Universe. It ascribes all human incentives to the feeding of material human wants and to the struggle for material gain. It describes all historical events as due solely to change in the means of production. It abrogates the most important human values and distinguishes man’s history from that of animals, and denigrates man’s most significant function, man being the primordial positive element on earth in the making of history. Marxism depicts the future as void of human legacies, assuming that human beings will be philanthropic angels, each individual producing his utmost but receiving only according to his needs.”<sup>31</sup>

Sayyid Qutb says that on another level, the clash between Marxism and Islam goes on. One of them, Islam, found its systems on belief in God, the other, Marxism, on denying God. Dialectical materialism dominates Marxism whereas the Creator dominates Islam. Ultimately, the conflict presented in economic terms (capitalist, communist, or socialist) is, for Sayyid Qutb, the conflict between spiritualism and materialism. Islam and religion represent the former in general, and the latter is represented by capitalism, socialism, and communism. Sayyid Qutb adds that Marxism is the most advanced level of mechanical and intellectual materialism, and though the two camps, the capitalist and the socialist, disagree and wage wars for their own benefit, their difference is a matter of degree, of organisation, and of method. Because the materialistic idea of life underlies both of them, Sayyid Qutb predicts the final victory for Marxism over capitalism when the economics of the West reach stagnation. This is so because communism is nothing but a progressive idea when compared to capitalism; it is progressive because it provides some basic material needs for people living under it and speaks to the governing authorities and the exploiting class. However, Sayyid Qutb believes that the outcome of both is unjust because in capitalism individuals and their ambitions rule over the community and in communism the state rules over individuals.

According to Sayyid Qutb the theory of evolution, from the viewpoint of its basis and concept, is contrary to the basic elements of the universe and nature; it creates a corruption from which there is no escape. For example according to this theory the

existence of the different forms of every body and system is original, while the reality is quite the opposite. Existence is of the basic elements only, and only these basic elements take on different forms and shapes. Sayyid Qutb believes that the European style of thought was tired of the Church and it wanted to throw away the external and the internal yoke of religion from its neck.<sup>32</sup> That is why Sayyid Qutb argues that the theory of evolution was invented there as a relief from the principles of religion and its laws. Sayyid Qutb says:

We understand the Western style of thought. Therefore, we do not condemn it, for the western thinkers found a religious environment that was loaded with false and baseless beliefs, metaphysical stories and idolatry. The Church was a symbol of oppression and tyranny, and the people of the Church, by treating absurdities as their beliefs, had blockaded all the roads to sane and intelligent thinking. Instead of condemning and reproaching them, we would like to find out the causes and the motivating forces which led to make this absurd and inconsistent theory acceptable. This theory is not an academic reality, but it is a manifestation of the unbridled desires, and intemperate inclinations, which came into being as a reaction to the oppression of the Church.<sup>33</sup>

Darwin is considered as the inventor of this theory. With him the meaning of 'existence' is every superficial, because his theory begins with the existence of 'life'. The condition prior to this, the source of life, and that 'Will' which is the source and origin of life have no place in his theory. Even in Europe now this theory is being subjected to various objections. Even if we concede that this theory is correct, we can say that this theory in its evolutionary process accepts the existence of a 'Will', or at least that which controls the movement of this evolution. This evolutionary process is essentially subject to the all-pervasive law of the universe, and this movement of the universe 'around a constant centre and within a fixed circle' is under a principle and a regulation.

Darwin denied the existence of God. Sayyid Qutb believes that this denial is not the result of his academic achievements or learning. According to him, it is not that Darwin tried to know the secrets of 'human life,' and his process of research compelled him to deny the existence of an Absolute Master, an All-Knowing Being, but that it was the reaction to the oppressive theories of the Church. He declared nature as the source of life. Then he could not be convinced of the existence of any Being, and finally he became a propagator of the theory of evolution.<sup>34</sup>

Sayyid Qutb is of the view that European ideas and theories cannot become a foundation of any Islamic thought, nor can these ideas be helpful in the task of reviving the religion.<sup>35</sup> These ideas cannot be borrowed either, as is wrongly felt by some Muslim thinkers due to some misunderstanding. Thus his viewpoint on the Islamic worldview has come to be fixed on the idea that he derives guidance directly from the Qur'n and says that 'we should create such an environment, according to our capability, as was obtaining at the time of the revelation of the Qur'n, when man was wandering aimlessly: then those conditions in which man turned away from the divine guidance and went astray in that thick forest'. Sayyid Qutb states:

Our manner of deriving guidance from the Qur'n should be such that we should not at all touch the matters which are already decided on the level of intellect and consciousness, nor should we turn to those remnants of civilisation from the Qur'n. Then realising that the content and the form have among themselves a deep relationship, we should not try to present the realities of the Islamic worldview in this borrowed form of the philosophy, particularly when the content is the Islamic concept. To present it in such a structure of philosophy as is not at all compatible with it from its nature and its historical standpoint would be a very improper thing to do, because the content cannot remain unaffected by the form. And sometimes it so happens that its very shape is distorted; and you would find great difference between its original version and the subsequent explanations. Only that person who has a taste for recognising the reality of this concept as it is presented in the Qur'n can understand this.<sup>36</sup>

Sayyid Qutb further says:

We want to invite your attention to one more aspect, that is: it is not our objective to point out any particular 'modification' in the Islamic thought, on which we spend our entire energy, and it may become the viewpoint of our efforts in presenting the Islamic worldview and its principles and elementary rules.' But our purpose is that we should explain the realities of the Islamic worldview itself, and with full natural balance and proportion as has been maintained by the Qur'n, we should try to highlight its every aspect, for if we devote ourselves to deal with only one particular modification or defect and try to counter it within the sphere of these realities, then this method will be very dangerous, and the result will be that by countering the old modification we would be introducing a new modification and deviation, after all, or deviation. We will find many examples of this danger in the books and articles written in defence of Islam to counter the orientalist and the new and old apostles, raising objections against Islam. Out of these some books are those which were written, in a particular atmosphere, for a particular deviation and for a particular time.<sup>37</sup>

Having expressed his views on various political theories and ideologies, and philosophical ways of introducing Islam, Sayyid Qutb concludes that the glitter of this materialistic culture should not blind our sight to the tangible misery which mankind suffers under its sway. He reiterates that those who fired rockets and orbiting satellites should not divert our attention from the precipice towards which man and his value systems are frenetically dashing. Finally, Sayyid Qutb declares that the role of the white man's civilisation has come to an end whether he was Russian, American, English, French, Swedish or anything else. It has come to an end by virtue of the hideous schizophrenia in European history and in all doctrines and systems prevailing in the West.<sup>38</sup>

#### The Muslim Bloc and Islamic Unity

Sayyid Qutb calls on Muslims of different nations to unite as a third force namely, 'the Muslim Bloc.' According to him this bloc could be established and identified under the banner of Islam. He believes that his Muslim Bloc would certainly provide all necessities

banner of Islam. He believes that his Muslim Bloc would certainly provide all necessities and needs which are essential for mankind with a rational approach that can give good shape to life. This Bloc would believe in real social justice, freedom and all kinds of benefits and facilities for every individual. He says that it would maintain a balance between the two opposing structures-Communism and Capitalism<sup>39</sup>

This Muslim Bloc would call people to peace and harmony and give them the opportunity of success and victory. They all believe in only one doctrine and it has only one history. This Muslim Bloc would have no inclination towards national pride. It would establish on this earth social justice, put an end to economic exploitation and promote universal brotherhood and fraternity, liberate human beings from colonial enslavement and treat them all as equal and expose to the world the purpose and objective of life. Not for the taste of worldly pleasure would it live, but it would attempt to accumulate good deeds for the welfare of the life hereafter.<sup>40</sup>

Sayyid Qutb treated the Muslim Brotherhood movement as the *حزب* (Party) of Allah, exalted is His praise that struggled to eliminate and annihilate sectarianism among people. It imposed certain guidance for individual income to wipe out extravagance and luxury, which might pave the way for arrogance and superciliousness. It also liberated peasants from serfdom, and economic exploitation and elevated their standard of living and moulded the standard. It raised the character of the people. It safeguarded universal social security of every individual and fought colonialism and viciousness wherever it was.<sup>41</sup>

#### Implementation of the *Shar‘ah*

When the Egyptian army was preparing to assume power of the government on 23rd June 1952, Sayyid Qutb extended his support to the army officers on some conditions. He extended his full cooperation to the armed revolution and published various articles exhorting people to extend their undivided support to the revolution.<sup>42</sup>

According to ‘Abd al-Hakīm ‘Abidin, the night when the revolution exploded, several soldiers with tanks visited Sayyid Qutb’s house in Hulwan. He was taken along with some officers to Cairo in order to be consulted, on the practical aspects and proceedings of the revolution. Sayyid Qutb accompanied by the army officers reached the army camp. He was the only civilian present with the leaders of the revolutionary council. They consulted him on all matters. He also participated with them in the voting process on the decision taken by them. He did not withdraw from them until six months after the revolution. It seems that he developed an uncompromising difference of opinion with the armed forces.<sup>43</sup>

President Jamal ‘Abd al-Naḥir advocated socialism and nationalism and opposed religious movements. Sayyid Qutb’s discussion of nationalism is especially directed at the Egypt and other Muslim countries which gave priority to nationalistic goals or, in many cases, gave only lip-service to Islam, if not rejecting outright religion as a dominant

force in politics. The difference of opinion emerged after the success of the revolution, especially when the leaders made up their minds to form the government with the support of the leaders of various political parties, nationalists and secularists. Sayyid Qutb insisted that Islam should be the basis of the constitution and the cabinet should comprise only Islamists who represented the Muslim Brotherhood. He fiercely opposed the inclusion of others in the cabinet. He also categorically asserted his stand against the revolutionary leaders' plan of including socialists and nationalists in the newly formed cabinet after their victory.

This sort of firm belief and dynamic stand of Sayyid Qutb in forming the government is evidence of his feeling for and dedication to the Islamic way of life. It was possible for him to accept the advice of the leaders of the revolution if he were insincere and egoistic. But he did not accept anything from them for the sake of friendship. He stood by his ideals and principles. For the sake of justice to the nation, he was willing to forego all pleasures and comforts promised to him. He did not have any vested interest. If he were to be an opportunist he would have accepted their offer. But he was firm in his belief and commitment. He maintained his stand of implementing Shar'ah after the formation of a government consisting of individuals committed to reform and Islamic way of life.

Having analysed his intense political thought and views on modern ideologies, it is relevant to note the contribution of a few others who stood for the revival of an Islamic society. Many predecessors of Sayyid Qutb sowed the seeds for the establishment of an Islamic society in their respective countries. They sacrificed their efforts and even life for religious reform. Their main aim was to bring about an Islamic resurgence all over the world. The contribution of only a few among them can be noted here. Sayyid Qutb was not only captivated by the ideas of such remarkable personalities but there was an impact of their vision on his idea too. This can be easily recognised in his political thought upon comparison of the same with the thought of the others.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghan (۱۸۹۷-۱۸۳۸) called on the Muslim society to return to Islamic dynamism and appealed for unity under the framework of an Islamic league. He stressed Pan-Islamic unity and travelled extensively to meet the leaders of the Muslim community to fight British colonialism.<sup>44</sup> His conviction was that no renaissance or reform would take place under a hostile regime. Therefore he appealed to the Muslim community to stand united to fight for the cause. Muḥammad 'Abduh (died in 1905) urged all Muslims to unite under an Islamic league. He appealed to people to support firmly Sultan 'Abd al-Hamīd who represented the goal of the unity of Muslims. He also called upon the people of Egypt to fight Britain. And he brought about religious reform.<sup>45</sup>

Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (۱۹۳۰-۱۸۶۰) through the publication of al-Manār struggled hard to achieve the dreams of his teacher 'Abduh. He also called upon people to come under the banner of Islam.<sup>46</sup> He called for social and religious reform. Hasan al-

Banna (1911-1973) carried out a systematic attack on each and every contemporary political structure and ideology. Among them communism, socialism and capitalism could be cited. He bitterly criticised Russia, America, Britain, France and Italy for their divide-and-rule policy, which affected the entire world. He stressed that they not only exploited humanity but put them under life-long discord through their propagation of man-made systems. He further said that there would be no benefit from nationalism and patriotic vision. He criticised the philosophy of nationalism, ethnocentrism and even patriotism. He called on all Islamic States to co-ordinate as one cell and to form a League of Islamic Nations.<sup>47</sup>

Muhammad Iqbal too believed that capitalism and communism were two emanated branches of the materialistic philosophy. He felt that this materialism was dangerous to Islamic unity. He urged unification of all Islamic countries under an Islamic league.<sup>48</sup> Mawdudi too was worried about the turning away of Muslims from Islam and their acceptance of different ideologies like communism and nationalism. He was the man of the twentieth century who launched a campaign against man-made ideologies. He warned the Muslim community of the perils of such theories and called upon Muslims to consolidate their efforts under the umbrella of one nation.<sup>49</sup> He propounded a one-Ummah theory, calling all countries to keep up their Islamic identity and preserve divine guidance free from materialistic and nationalistic prejudices.

In reality, such calls of the Muslim reformers and thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, as we stated above, were instrumental in the formation of Organisation of Islamic Conference. The Muslim world realised the need to have a common forum to voice out their grievances. But how far the OIC has succeeded in achieving the objectives of the Muslim world is beyond the scope of our discussion.

#### Sayyid Qutb on Muslims' Education

Sayyid Qutb regrets the present state of the Muslims, which ignored the truthful statement on the characteristics of Jews and Christians as enshrined in the Qur'an, and sent their children to acquire the knowledge of Islam from them and to understand and accept the Islamic heritage from their interpretation. Sayyid Qutb, it seems, was totally against the system of education which is given under the patronage or supervision, of the Jews, Christians and Communists and which brainwashes the young Muslims. To quote his words:

It behoves us today to hear the voice of warning as with unprecedented stupidity we seek the opinion of the Orientalists (of Jews, Christians and Communists) in the matter of religion. We learn our history from them, trusting their statements about our heritage, hearing what they interpolate of doubts in their studies of our Qur'an, the Hadith of our Prophet, and the lives of our pioneers. We send them delegations of our students to learn from them the teachings of Islam. They graduate from their universities and return to us infected in intellect and conscience.<sup>50</sup>

For his transparency in sharing his views and thoughts as mentioned above, Sayyid Qutb was historically misunderstood and even portrayed as an extremist, a fundamentalist rather a militant generating hatred against the Jews in particular and Zionists and Communists in general. Even some Muslim historians write that Sayyid Qutb was harsh and unbalanced in attacking the Jews and was blaming them for every event in the Muslim world. According to these historians and writers, Muslims themselves are responsible for any kind of disastrous growth of elements and factors in the Muslim world. They argue that Sayyid Qutb's mind was influenced by the circumstances in which he lived. It is even suggested that Sayyid Qutb's long-term jail sentence had made him to behave antagonistically. Some even conclude that the discussions in *Fi ʿilal al-Qurʿan* reflect his frustration and difficult time in prison.

However, regardless of the above views, it is essential to look at many facts and historical incidents on which the people had no information in the past but which have been unveiled by researchers recently, before one makes his judgement on whether Sayyid Qutb was right and truthful. When people made such comments on Sayyid Qutb's frame of mind, they were unaware of many things about his stand and perception. It is true that the abrogation of the caliphate, the establishment of Israel on the land of Palestine, continuous imperial and colonial support for monarchy and dynastic rule in the Muslim world, recognition of Israel by the United Nations and several other historical events are the key factors that persuaded Sayyid Qutb that the international forces were working against Islam and Muslim unity.

Sayyid Qutb is categorically of the opinion that Muslim children should not obtain religious education from Jews and Christians or Orientalists. He says that Muslims have no excuse as Allah, exalted is His praise, has warned them in the Qur'an about the dangers of accepting these forces as allies. Sayyid Qutb quotes Samuel Zwemer to prove that Western education as advanced by missionaries in Missionary Schools was partly the conspiracy to divorce Islam from the Muslims. Sayyid Qutb cites Zwemer: "Our mission is to have Muslims leave Islam and make them subservient to our teachings, our influence and our ideas.... Every one who graduates from these schools abandons Islam in actuality if not in name. He becomes an aid to our policy without knowing or he becomes trusting of us... We have accepted unequivocally."<sup>51</sup>

#### Sayyid Qutb's Theory of Society

The understanding of Islam by Sayyid Qutb seems to be profound, comprehensive, and original. In particular, his theory on contemporary society was well received by the supporters of Islamic movements in spite of criticism by some quarters. Even today most of the leaders and workers of the Islamic movement look upon his theory of society and his critique of Western political ideology as important. He had a good philosophy of life. His writings demonstrate that he unhesitatingly disclosed his conviction through his books and articles. Since he spent most of his life in Cairo, especially the latter part, he got an opportunity to observe various ideologies, philosophies, and ways of life adopted by different nations in general, and Muslims in particular.

History shows that Egypt was one of the Arab countries that presented a marvellous civilisation to the world. Many of the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa appreciated and unquestioningly adopted this civilisation. The fragrance of Egyptian civilisation reached even the hearts of Europeans and Americans. That is why 'Abbas Maḥ-mūd al-'Aqqad says that Europe is indebted to Arab culture because of its borrowing of numerous things from Arab civilisation.<sup>52</sup> He further says that the Arab contribution is really remarkable as far as civilisation is concerned. The famous city of Cairo that projected a new civilisation to the world became the target of Western conspiracy due to its vast learning and being the seat of Arab and Islamic intellectualism in the twentieth century. Due to the conspiracy of the Western powers, Egypt went through a period of social, economic, educational, intellectual and spiritual crisis. Some of the people had fallen prey to this and started adopting different ways of life that did not receive any recognition from Islam. Their eyes were blinded by these Western influences. Furthermore, it is stated that people were so obsessed with imitating the Western way of life that they cooled down their religious spirit and vigour on any issue and assimilated with the West.

In such an environment, Sayyid Qutb was one of those few scholars who were against the new Western life style. Sayyid Qutb devoted his entire life not only to understanding the differences between Islam and other systems but also to identifying and explaining the fallacies and deficiencies of Western ideologies. He admonished the people for their adherence to these man-made systems. And finally, he distinguished the contemporary society into two compartments namely Islamic society and Jahiliyyah society. By Islamic society he meant civilised society and by Jahiliyyah society he meant the backward society. Following are the interpretations and illustrations of the two societies categorised by Sayyid Qutb.

Sayyid Qutb strongly believes that Islamic society is the society that recognises the law of God, the supreme power, as the Sharḥ'ah or law of the land. It asserts the Unity of God and absolutely sincere observance of it both in words and deeds. It does not accept any sovereignty of man and only accepts the absolute, comprehensive and indivisible sovereignty of Allah who is One, and Ultimate. It grants to every individual the freedom of will. It does not confine people only to so-called religious duties such as prayer, fast and pilgrimage but it prescribes the Sharḥ'ah of the Lord as a complete code of life for humanity. It also covers the needs and requirements of day-to-day life. The people surrender themselves to the Will of Allah the Exalted and the Glorious, and follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him, and the footprints of the Divinely-Guided Caliphs.<sup>53</sup>

According to Sayyid Qutb, Jahiliyyah society is the society that is not accepted and recognised by Islam as a complete and comprehensive way of life. Islam neither goes along with it nor does it agree with its doctrines and character. Jahiliyyah society implies that which obstructs the implementation of the divine code as a source of economic, judicial, moral, and social life. It has kept its collaboration with whoever has deviated

from the fundamental principles of Islam. It is just possible to expose the different formation of Jahiliyyah that has no specific concept or status. It represents a version of idol worship and finds new tenets to support the worship of icons. Certainly, these idols may take various forms. Different new names and concepts as well as philosophies are emerging everyday from these icons, which assume the status of new gods. They are responsible for new postulates, which attract sections of Jahiliyyah to them. This Jahiliyyah is always perilous in as much as it directs human beings to go beyond the limit. It does not have a long history of influence but it is taken as the guiding light of today, and attempts to establish its own organisation for the future. The world of today is living in an acute state of Jahiliyyah that dishonours the appearance and the existence of Islam. Everything around us demonstrates and pours evidence for this. The doctrines, customs, traditions, cultures, and arts are exposing this trend of jahiliyyah. Sayyid Qutb believes that all contemporary societies together with communism, Christianity or Judaism embody some parts of Jahiliyyah because it offers priority to materialism with its various formations, which are the adversaries of human spiritualism.<sup>54</sup> It encourages the worship of man by man and surrenders powers to some other powers.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, Sayyid Qutb contends about the communist society, which also joins hands with Jahiliyyah society because the Marxists deny the existence of Allah exalted is His praise. They say that materialism or nature is the original universe and existence. The history of human activity has been interpreted completely through the economic dealing and the means of production. They are raising their voices to establish a new structure based on absolute surrender to the will of the party. They confine life to the satisfaction of essential human needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, in a system, which views human beings as animals at least to some extent. Though literally it tries to solve some of the problems, it ignores the essential character of spiritual life, which is indispensable to mankind. It makes people more fanatical about the worldly pleasures, and due to its display of material lust, people are intoxicated and made to neglect everything else. It interdicts the will of the people according to its ability. In this way, it sterilises the human brain and conceals the truth.<sup>56</sup>

Sayyid Qutb discusses several aspects of the predominant society of Christianity and Judaism that are widely found in all corners of the world. He states that in spite of its denial of God and His sovereignty over heaven and earth, they approve worship in churches, temples, synagogues but they do not permit the implementation the Shar‘ah of Allah, exalted is His praise, on this earth. The Christians not only consider their priests as divine but they glorify and worship them. They also give them the authority to make laws, enforcing laws, which were made by them, not permitted by God. The Jewish Rabbis and the Christian priests are attempting to keep away people from the truth. They are being treated as lords and in the name of religion; they swallow assets of their disciples. The Jews and Christians nominate rabbis and priests as their intercessors in order to seek pardon from God. That is why Sayyid Qutb did not approve of this society and also listed them in the rolls of Jahiliyyah. He quotes some of the evidence from the Qur’an to strengthen his view, which proves his notion as valid.<sup>57</sup>

According to Sayyid Qutb, there are other societies too that are the descendants of

Jahiliyyah, because the structure and legislation that govern them have no link with religion that connects with the divine law of Allah (exalted is His praise) and Islam. Then, the Jahiliyyah character consists, first, of the fact that they believe in gods other than God; second, they have constructed an elaborate system of devotional acts to propitiate these deities. Similarly the laws and regulations are derived from sources other than God and His Sharḥ. They worship everything other than God and attribute innumerable traits to their deities. They consider these gods as supreme powers and they are not ready to return to the original source, that is God, the supreme power.<sup>58</sup>

And lastly Sayyid Qutb illustrates about the societies that live in countries which are ruled by other than Muslims. According to him, they also somehow or other come under Jahiliyyah sect; in spite of their belief in the Unity of God, they slip away from the divinity of Islam.<sup>59</sup> Though the declaration of their system of life was thought to be Islamic, yet the practical field of work exposed their impotence and incapacity to maintain the pure spirit of Islam while living in these nations. That is why Sayyid Qutb criticised this sort of society, which is being exploited by the environmental factors and through false interpretation and explanation of the Government by using the weapon of power. Such societies, which are compelled to relinquish the birthright of religious identity, are also labelled as Jahiliyyah. They deviate from the Islamic code of life under the pressure of national legislation and judiciary, in spite of the commandment of the divine power not to fear anyone or anything except Allah, exalted is His praise.<sup>60</sup> Instead of turning their hearts towards Allah, exalted is His praise; they direct them towards their governmental systems, which try to ruin them. Sayyid Qutb quotes the following Qur'anic verses to throw light on his conclusions.

Those whom ye worship besides Him are but names, which you have named, ye and your fathers; Allah hath revealed no sanction for them. The decision rests with Allah only, who hath commanded you that Ye worship none save Him. This is the Right religion, but most men know not. (Surah Yusuf 12:40)

And we prescribed for them therein: The life for the life and the eye for the eye, and the nose for the nose, and the ear for the ear, and the tooth for the tooth and for wounds retaliation. But whoso forget it (in the way of charity) it shall be expiation for him. Whoso Judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed such are wrong doers. (Surah al-Ma'idah 5:45)

## Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, we observe the distinction between Islamic Society and Jahiliyyah Society according to Sayyid Qutb. Sayyid Qutb was not the first Islamic thinker who waged an attack on contemporary Western civilisation, discovered the faults concealed in it and described it as "ignorance," but there were many other Muslim scholars before him who tried to awaken the Muslim society from the dangers of contemporary civilisation.<sup>61</sup> This idea was already presented by some scholars earlier than the Muslim Brotherhood and by a few after the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, Muhammad 'Abduh also expressed his views regarding the philosophical foundation as well as consequences of various contemporary societies.

There are other scholars who accept this view, which has been already advocated by this movement and is influenced by the ideology of the movement.

Since the ideas and thoughts reflected in their writings are similar to the ideology and the methodology of the Muslim Brotherhood, it may be inferred that others are also influenced by this thought. Their views are analysed very briefly in the following pages, from which the readers can understand the role of the Islamic movement in future.

Muhammad 'Abduh noted that the Western civilisation was the social refinement of culture based on materialism, force, trade, luxury and affluence. He further said that Islam has offered the real understanding of life. According to him Islamic society is the one which is the most honoured and civilised one. It suits human nature. It does not neglect temporal or spiritual needs and pre-requisites like justice, equality, force, peace, unity, mutual co-ordination, majesty, benevolence, affection and forbearance. He said that mankind would never recognise the meaning of fortune and prosperity unless they concentrate on this system of life. Allah, exalted is His praise, has created this Universe and kept it constantly dynamic, which governs the entire system. All verses of the Qur'an justify and flow on this system. As far as the present civilisation is concerned it neglects the system of divine guidance. This system seeks peace and tranquillity only in Jahiliyyah that was in the dark and was discarded at the dawn of Islam. Islam came to refine people who lived in various ways and under different names according to their desires and internal urges. But Muslims are now drifting far from Islam and adopt the superstitious trends as their way of life. At present, they do not possess anything except the mere name of Islam.<sup>62</sup>

'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakib criticised the Western materialistic way of life which according to him lacks all those high fundamentals and noble principles which are necessary to preserve the moral integrity of mankind.<sup>63</sup> Iqbal also observed that the Western civilisation, in spite of its lofty pronouncements, is the evolution of conflict, because it is based on alcohol, immorality, and gambling. Materialistic and industrial civilisations will not last long without new materials and end products. This civilisation exploits human beings through the domination of man over man. But Islam is a greater way to success. It is the only system capable of achieving the New World. It preserves the dignity of individuals and solves the problems of the people on the basis of equality.<sup>64</sup>

Abu'l-Hasan 'Al-Nadwi distinguishes the structure of life into two kinds which includes Jahiliyyah life and Islamic life. Nadwi says that the Jahiliyyah system of life is a materialistic system that gives the first importance to material production and considers its interest based on character. It does not believe in special life. It does not believe in political life without force. It does not believe in social life without racism and nationalism. It is established on the basis of subjection of man to man. It believes in the affairs of pagan nations and worship of infidels. People adhere to worshipping their lust, idols, graves, sculptures, rabbis, monks, kings, and leaders. They also offer sacrifices to objects like statues and idols. The world of today has taken its shelter particularly in

Europe because the present civilisation creates an impression that it is the only perfect one. It is a civilisation of entertainment, profligacy, decadent character, social disintegration, economic exploitation, spiritual hunger, and threat of war with the destruction of peace.<sup>65</sup>

The Islamic system of life is a system that gives a healthy civilisation, because it implements the Sharī‘ah of Allah, exalted is His praise, the Lord, the Creator of life on the earth. Besides regulating moral and spiritual aspects of human beings, it endeavours to establish peace and harmony for the entire humanity on the basis of justice and truth.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, it can be noted that Sayyid Qutb’s socio-political thought as presented and analysed above reveals his clear understanding of the opposition between Western system of life and the Islamic way of life. Having highlighted the fallacies and deficiencies of the modern and contemporary political ideologies, Sayyid Qutb is convinced of the fact that in Islam alone contemporary society can find peace and prosperity both materially and spiritually.

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