

Two-day Online International Conference on
**“Personality and Contribution of Dr. Mohammad Natsir
as a National and International Thought-Leader
in the 20th Century”**
On
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Words of Appreciation
by
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Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuhu!

I thank Allah for the privilege He has granted me to be among some of the most learned Islamic scholars who have come on the stage via Zoom to discuss the great contributions of Dr Mohammad Natsir to the world of knowledge, democracy, Indonesian polity and the place of Islam within that.

I take the privilege of speaking a few words before you with profound humility on my part and a great regard for our learned scholars joining this programme organised by the Institute of Objective Studies (IOS), New Delhi, in collaboration with Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor, Indonesia, and International Institute of Islamic Thought, USA.

As an institution we try to look at issues in an Islamic perspective that embraces all modern social sciences. This is one reason we have opted to talk about Dr Natsir who was as learned and wise as the legendry Dr. Mohammad Iqbal in the sub-continent. Dr Natsir (who, incidentally, had got three honorary doctorates - one from Lebanon and two from Indonesia) was a formidably learned person who knew Western philosophy, political thought, art and literature spanning over two and a half millennia, right from Socrates till date. That was possible because of his mastery over five languages, including English and French.

Universality of Islam

In that background, and with his profound knowledge of Islam and Arabic, he found the strict standards of equality, justice and human fraternity enshrined in the Quran and Hadith were well-suited for the constitutions of independent countries anywhere. These ideas, universal in nature, transcending creed,

colour, time and climate, are so vital that in one form or the other they have been appropriated in most constitutions of the world, including the US constitution. Benjamin Franklin and William Jefferson had noted these Islamic values. This was exactly what Mahatma Gandhi had meant when several years before Dr Natsir's articulation he said that he would like India to be governed on the pattern of Hazrat Omar Farooq's administration, an exemplar of the Shariah's insistence on justice and fair play to all, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Dr Natsir was working for a democratic Indonesia which should respect and accommodate the Islam-inspired life of Muslims who constitute 88 per cent of the population. He was working as part of a political scenario that consisted of Islamists, nationalists and communists-aetheists. In the power struggle, the communists-aetheists lost with the ouster of President Sukarno in 1967.

Mental resourcefulness

What concerns us here is Dr Natsir's extraordinary efforts in all situations to promote the pursuit of knowledge in a modern format, for which he thought the curricula of religious schools were not adequate. Instead of condemning them, he established his own educational institutions that accommodated modern knowledge in an Islamic perspective. He did not condemn the West or laud the East, but chose to enrich knowledge from all sources. This was an echo of the Prophet's (PBUH) assertion, "Knowledge is the lost treasure of a Muslim. Take it wherever you find it." That was what Dr Natsir did, picking up knowledge from all sources, developing his own ideas of a perfect life in keeping with the best values of Islam.

In his widely acclaimed 3-volume *Capita Selecta* (written between 1936 and 1960) the encyclopedic sweep of his knowledge is evident. Today we need more such men of faith and letters with such activist enthusiasm, but we are in an acutely short supply of them.

Another point to be noted here is that he was not aiming for a majoritarian state of 88 per cent Muslims to ride roughshod over the 12 per cent minorities, but was mindful of protecting all of their religious and cultural rights. Here also the guiding light has been the Prophet (PBUH), who in his last days had advised his companions to be kind to women and warned them never to wrong the non-Muslim minorities. He strictly said that if a non-Muslim was wronged he (the Prophet) would stand with the non-Muslim before Allah against the wrong-doing Muslim. Such high ideals were always before men

like Dr Natsir when they were dealing with Islamic principles of life and governance.

Response to Western colonial dominance

In the 19th century, when the entire Muslim world (except Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and today's Saudi Arabia) came under military occupation of European powers like Britain, France, Holland and Portugal, even the above four, although not directly under European military boots, were still manipulated and indirectly controlled by European powers.

For the Muslim world it was the most difficult hour as their way of life, belief and worship - their entire culture - was seriously endangered because of colonial dominance. At that moment several Islamic movements arose all over the Muslim world that articulated the issue carefully and sought to redress the harm. Men like Mohammad Abduh, Jamaluddin Afghani and Rashid Rida were the first to articulate it.

The second generation was that of Maulana Abul A'ala Mawdudi, Syed Hasan al-Banna and Syed Qutub etc. Dr Natsir had studied these writers-reformers, and when the colonial rule began to dismantle everywhere Muslim thinkers and leaders everywhere tried to participate in the post-colonial reconstruction and revive the Islamic values. Dr Natsir being the third generation of such leaders had a lead over many as he had begun to implement his reform ideas (particularly on education) right from the days of Dutch rule and Japanese occupation.

In him there is a role model for most Islamically-oriented people all over the world, whether living in Muslim-majority states or in minority situation, to live as Muslims without bothering too much about nomenclature or *fiqhi* nitty-gritty and wasting time and energy on fruitless disputations.

A constantly growing mind and personality

Most people stop growing intellectually and spiritually right in their 20s and reformers are often exhausted by the time they enter their 70s and 80s. That was never the case with Dr Natsir, who began his public life admiring and defending the Indonesian five pillars (*Pancasila*, a Sanskrit word for five principles) of state policy. He regarded these ideas (the first was about God being one) as based on Islamic principles.

Later, when he saw communists and atheists resorting to the same *Pancasila* to argue their case, he distanced himself from it. When a huge gathering of leaders of newly decolonised Afro-Asian countries came together in Bandung city of Indonesia in 1955 (attended by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Joseph Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, among others) they decided to be neutral in the cold war between America-led military alliance and the opposing Russia-led military bloc. The Bandung conference led to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement. Interestingly, this conference too adopted a *Pancasila* that was about neutrality between Russia and America and had nothing in common with the Indonesian *Pancasila*. Naturally, *Pancasila* had gone far beyond its original meaning and content and Dr Natsir found no continuity in the idea.

For most of us Dr Natsir's illustrious example represents the value of study and action, de-emphasising disputations on nomenclature and constant evolution and adaptation to life's realities.

With these few words I look forward to have more fruitful deliberations over the next two days.

My best wishes to each one of you. Thank you!