Article

Islamophobia and The Challenge of Being Muslim in Institutions of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: With the rise of extremist and terror activities by the various groups which are alleged to be associated with Muslim religion, people of non-Muslim communities hold a negative perception about Islam and Muslims. This study examined challenges faced by Muslim students in two public universities in Zimbabwe. The study was informed by the Social Dominance Theory. Eighteen Muslim students participated in the study, and they were identified through purposive sampling from students' religious societies. The findings revealed that Islamophobia in public universities has resulted in Muslim students facing various challenges that include stigmatization and labelling, institutional and religious discrimination, being denied their religious rights such as performing their prayers and their societies not being recognised as official religious society at the institutions whilst other faiths and religions are awarded that opportunity. The participants also pointed out that they encounter hate crimes and verbal abuse in the lecture rooms. Students from minor religions therefore face grievous challenges in public space in Zimbabwe where the majority of the population claim to subscribe to Christian faith. The study proffers several recommendations among them; universities should investigate discrimination on grounds of religious affiliation, conducting awareness campaigns to benefit minority religious groups and sensitising university staff to be religiously conscious in their conduct.

Keywords: Islamophobia, higher learning institutions, discrimination, labelling, Zimbabwe, Social Dominance theory, Muslim, Islam

Introduction and Background

Islam as a religion has been negatively portrayed by man non-Muslim people across the globe. Most Muslims living in predominantly non-Muslim societies encounter distinct challenges such as lack of acceptance and recognition (Shah, 2017). Pressure and scrutiny have been the most tenets upon Muslims in the past few years as a result of how people associate it with terrorism which all have resulted in Islamophobia that is the hatred and fear of the Islamic faith and Muslims. Islam is the second fastest and largest rising religion in the world (Mirza, 2007). It is a monotheistic religion that believes in only one God who is referred to Allah which refers to The God of all humanity (Hill, 2012). Islam means to surrender or fully submit to the will of The Creator. A Muslim is a person who submits to the will of Allah and professes the religion of Islam (Ahmed, 2016). The sacred book for Muslims is the Holy Qur'an which is ultimately acknowledged as the foundation and basis of Islamic beliefs and ideologies. Religiously, Muslims have got some practices and beliefs which they carry out which seem different in a non-Muslim environment. The five fundamental articles of Islamic faith are monotheism or belief in one God, praying five times a day, fasting during the whole month of Ramadan, charity and Hajj which is making pilgrimage to Mecca. The other vital articles which form the Islamic faith is belief in the angels, the Holy scriptures, the Old Testament prophets with Muhammad (peace be upon him) being their last prophet and also belief in life after death (Shah, 2017).

Muslims strictly abide by their beliefs and practices such as praying five times daily on prescribed times, fasting for 29 or 30 days the whole ninth month of the lunar calendar which is called Ramadan. They also have got a strict diet as they do not eat pork or any animal or meat from an animal which may have been improperly killed, as well as their dress code whereby the Muslim women are supposed to cover from their head to the toe and not greeting a member of the opposite sex with bare hands (Mandivenga, 1983). Nevertheless, Islam is not just a religion or faith for Muslims, it is a complete way of life (Asali, 2019). This is so because the religion shapes a person's several facets of life like dressing, diet, etc.

In regard to their beliefs and practices, when Muslims engage in a non-Muslim environment such as multicultural tertiary institutions, they encounter a lot of challenges due to the misunderstandings and various misconceptions and speculations pertaining them and their faith (Khosrojedi, 2015). A university campus atmosphere is well known to be a multicultural and diverse environment and this in a way becomes a challenge as most institutions in non-Muslim countries overlook the needs and challenges encountered by their students especially those of developing countries (Bennett, Volet & Fozdar, 2013). This therefore leads to issues such as institutional discrimination as students from faiths which are not fully understood and accepted such as Islam are not catered for. Thus, Muslim students are in a state of worry in as much as their identity is concerned or as a result of various challenges they encounter from their non-Muslim peers, the community and media. Some of the challenges they encounter include negative factors such as discrimination, religious stereotypes, speculation, assault and harassment and prejudice (Ahmed, 2016). There is also a challenge on how non-Muslim or multicultural institutions and people negotiate with their issue of prayers, their dress code as well as the restrictions they encounter in as much as their diet is concerned (Ahmed, 2016).

Approximately 2% of Zimbabweans subscribe to Islamic faith (World Population Review, 2019). This shows how the followers of the religion are just a minority in a majority of a multi-religious and multi-cultural environment. With Muslims being a small community in Zimbabwe, there are various challenges they encounter from a micro to the macro level that is from their personal level up to the policy making and national level. Individually, most people who profess the religion of Islam struggle to effectively express themselves to their peers. This is as a result of the inferiority complex most of them profess as they fear harassment and name-calling due to their lifestyles which seem odd and peculiar to those of their non-Muslim colleagues (Ahmed, 2016). At a community and national level, Muslims encounter various challenges ranging from policy making as well as cohesion and acceptance in their neighbourhoods and communities (Mandivenga, 1983). Despite that, Chapter 4 Sections 51 and 60 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) bestow upon every individual the right to have his or her dignity protected and honoured as well as the freedom to express one's faith and conscience, but these have been negated to Muslims, as a result of the misconceptions and speculations associated with their faith as well as the discrimination they encounter in institutions as well as the society. This study therefore, investigated the challenges encountered by Muslim students at institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

The study was informed by the Social Dominance Theory (SDT) by Sidanius and Pratto. The theory seeks to understand how group based social hierarchy is formed and maintained (Pratto, Sidanius & Levin, 2006). SDT focuses on individual and institutions that promote different forms of group-based oppression. According to the theory, humans have a general tendency to form and maintain group-based hierarchy and this leads to discrimination, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and sexism (Sidanius et al., 2004). The theory views societies as systems. It maintains that processes at different levels of the society work together to produce systemic effect. The theory argues that societies producing stable economic surplus possess three different systems of group-based hierarchy; gender system in which men have power over women, age system in which adults have power over children and arbitrary set system in which groups formed on arbitrary basis may have different access to societal values (Pratto et al., 2006). The group based social hierarchy is produced by the net effect of discrimination across multiple levels; institutions, individuals and collaborative intergroup processes (Pratto et al., 2006). They went on to argue that discrimination across these levels is coordinated to favour dominant groups over subordinate groups by legitimising myths. Most societies have universal and subtle forms of discrimination and oppression. Institutions as a vehicle of discrimination allocate prestige and power to certain groups while discriminating against less powerful groups. This is the case in Zimbabwe where most institutions, including the central government identify with Christianity at the expense of other religions.

During gatherings like graduation ceremonies in universities, a Christian clergy is usually given an opportunity to pray which hardly happens with other religions. Most people in Zimbabwe therefore share beliefs that legitimise discrimination, and this belief is that Christianity is the correct religion and everyone else should convert to it.

Christianity generally enjoys supremacy over most religions in Zimbabwe. Most people claim to have been raised by Christian families. There are a number of institutions ranging from schools, universities, teacher's colleges to hospitals that are owned by Christian organisations. Christianity is thus more dominant compared to other religions like Islam. This is despite the fact that Islam was introduced before Christianity. Dodo (2017) claimed that early Muslims in Zimbabwe focused more on trade than converting locals to their religious belief. When Christian missionaries arrived later, their propensity to convert locals saw their religion enjoying monopoly. Christians are monotheists who believe that only Jehovah God should be worshiped through His only son Jesus Christ. This is exacerbated by a Bible verse (John 14:6) in which Jesus Christ said "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me" Any other religion therefore becomes wrong, misguided and demonic.

Constitutionally, Zimbabwe recognises religious pluralism. The Bill or Rights in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No 20 of 2013), recognises freedom of worship. Despite this, only Christian holidays like Easter and Christmas appear on the national calendar. Dodo (2017:134) cited a number of incidents in which members of other religions were discriminated in Zimbabwe. These include the following:

- The refusal by the High Court to swear-in Munyaradzi Gwisai in 1998 as a practicing lawyer, arguing that he was dread-locked. His defence was that he followed Rastafarian religion.
- In 2009, two Muslims in their religious attire were systematically removed from the outside gardens of the parliament during an official opening by the Zimbabwe President.
- In 2012, a Muslim was temporarily detained at Harare International Airport for conducting prayers within the outside restaurant area.
- In 2014, Justice Davison Moses Foroma struggled to be allowed to be sworn-in as a judge using Koran instead of Bible.
- Muslim students in public schools are not allowed their apparel especially the burqa. 6. Forced recital of the national pledge in schools by the relevant ministry.

Though there are a number of Muslim organisations in Zimbabwe, they have been suppressed as Christianity enjoys dominance. Examples of these organisations include Zimbabwe Islamic Mission, African Muslim Agency, Zimbabwe Moslem Youth Organisation and Majlisul Ulama Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research methods. McNabb (2010) defines it as a non-numerical scientific way of gathering data. The study targeted Muslim students in two public universities in Zimbabwe. The researchers identified 18 Muslim students in the two institutions through students' religious societies and these formed the study sample. Data was collected using in-depth face to face interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis. Research ethics of informed consent, confidentiality, avoidance of harm and anonymity were observed during the research process.

Results of The Study

The following themes emerged during data analysis:

1. Islamophobia

Muslim students in the study spoke about the negativity attached to their religion at the campuses. A similar observation was made by Shah (2017), who reported that Muslims experience dread, hatred, and hostility. All this is due to the derogatory and negative attributes and stereotypes towards them. In this study, some of the female participants spoke about explicit Islamophobic comments they usually receive from their peers:

> *"As I walk around the campus, some students refer to me as a terrorist due to my dressing of covering up my whole body and wearing a veil."*

A male student also pointed out an assertion which is similar to the above:

"Most of my classmates refer to me as a terrorist in jest. During the first days I used to get angry but I am now used to it"

Yet another student had to say:

"During my second year, I got into an emotional relationship with a Christian girl and the relationship lasted for eight weeks as the girl broke up with me. The reason was that I made it apparent that I am a Muslim and she told me that I have to become a Christian too for me to date her of which I cannot change my religion. We had a heated argument as she made some negative comments towards my religion as she said that during the Sadaka's, we cook our food with water which was used to bath a dead person and I told her that such were falsehoods pertaining our religion as there is no basis for that but she then broke up with me after I refused to convert as she wanted me to do".

In a way, the above comments point out to the Islamophobic attributes which the students are given at the campuses. The common element in the above comments is being referred to as a "terrorist". Their non-Muslim colleagues tend to have a limited perspective and knowledge pertaining Islam and they view it as a religion of terror and violence. Also, most individuals tend to hear about the religion from other people's perspectives and tend to have limited knowledge pertaining it as the last quote above that one of the participants was emotionally scarred due to the speculative knowledge his partner had. This therefore shows the hyper Islamophobic feeling which most of the non-Muslims have got towards their Muslim peers at the campus. Also, one of the participants also pointed out certain remarks from her sociology lecturer whereby she said:

"During my first year at the campus, one of my lecturers for a sociology course pointed out a remark I will never forget in my life. While giving a lecture about institutions in the society, she said that religion is a bad apple in the society especially religions like Islam. They bring terror and kill people for no reason all in the name of terrorism. Hence, they are terrorists. And I was in the classroom that time and since then, I do not disclose about my religion to anyone in fear of being referred to as one by my colleagues and classmates".

Therefore, the above shows the Islamophobic zeal. This, as was indicated in the study, shows that even some of the lecturers have got negative attitude and misinformation towards the religion of Islam. In line with the Social Dominance Theory, this therefore deters students from excelling in a certain course because they tend to be psychologically attacked with some of the actions and comments they tend to get from them. Some Muslim students in this study spoke about explicit Islamophobic comments they receive from both fellow students and lecturers.

2. Stigmatization, Labelling and Biases
Majority of the participants pointed out to conscious and unconscious bias and stigma they encounter. In similar study by Appleton (2005) also factored out the effects of stigma as well as bias perception towards Muslim students by lecturers who have got limited knowledge pertaining the religion. One of the participants elucidated that:

"I am an Agricultural Science student and in the last semester as a freshman at the University, one of my tutors made a remark I will not forget. After raising my hand to give an answer during a tutorial, he picked me up by saying 'Yes Boko Haram, what's the answer'. Guys I have never been humiliated like that before. Instead of giving the answer, I ended up being confused and I do not even know if what I said was right or wrong in line with the question which had been asked"

The above statement by the participant reveals the effects of having a misinformed knowledge base or a lacking knowledge pertaining the culture or faith of a certain individual. This is so because from the above, the student was confident in giving an answer but as soon as he was picked up by his tutor through a negative

remark, he then lost his ground and ended up being humiliated and frustrated by that. This therefore conforms to the study by Ahmad (2016) whereby he elucidates the role of the tutors as being the role models of the students in a class and that the negative picture they give on Muslims students tends to hinder their full academic potential.

In addition to the above, another participant had this to say:

"The Boko Haram title seems to be very popular amongst our non-Muslim colleagues and they tend to use it very much upon us satirically whereby I remember a certain instance in 2017 when the Chibok incident took place in Nigeria. Most people who were abreast with the news usually called me the nickname 'Boko Haram' and to some extent they would laugh at me in front of girls saying that I may abduct them. Emotionally, my ego was bruised and at first I would tell them that I do not like it and the more I got angry the more they did so. I then got used to it and it slowly ended but at times when I give presentations in class they call out that name".

The above sentiment by the participant shows a major challenge of labelling which cognitively affects the students as they will be interacting with their fellow colleagues which is supported by the socio-cultural perspective. The above participant shows the element of having a blind eye and ignoring the sentiments but emotionally affecting him as he is given labels by his fellow colleagues. This therefore shows that stigmatization and labelling are also other challenges which Muslims as students in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe tend to encounter through the biased perceptions their lecturers, tutors or other students might have.

3. Denial of having a Prayer Space

During the study, the researchers enquired from the students how they were being accommodated and supported spiritually at the campuses and the majority mentioned the need of being accepted and treated equally with students from other religions. One of them pointed out that:

"If you go to the church yard or area, you see our Christian friends and classmates fulfilling their duties through prayer, singing, praise and worship. But as for us, we are not accommodated at all in that area. Along with my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, we went to enquire from the chaplain to get recognition and be offered a prayer space in that area and he told us to compile a list of the Muslims at the campus, acquire a letter from a recognized Islamic institution as well as select an advisor who will be overseeing our activities at the campus and that was in 2017. Up to date, we have been going to the office of the chaplain as a follow up to our case but he keeps on telling us that our papers are being processed. This is hilarious because imagine our papers are being processed for three consecutive years. Some of our brothers and sisters graduated and nothing has been done yet."

The above points out another challenge which the students encounter at the campus which is not being afforded a prayer space to fulfil their spiritual duty. State universities in Zimbabwe are public institutions that should accommodate all individuals despite their diverse backgrounds as is stated by the constitution of Zimbabwe. Section 60 (1) which states that "Every person has a right to freedom of conscience, which includes (b) freedom to practice and propagate and give expression to their thought, opinion, religion, or belief, whether in public or in private whether alone or with others." (4) Any religious community may establish institutions where religious instruction may be given, even if the institution receives a subsidy or other financial assistance from the state. This clearly enunciates the right and freedom of conscience as enshrined in the nation's constitution as a bill of rights to all citizens of Zimbabwe but the Muslim students at some state universities are being denied that right and it is a major challenge they are facing. This is so because all individuals function physically, but the spiritual aspect should not be denied. Another student also pointed out:

"I had a roommate in the halls of residence during my first year second semester who reported me to the janitor saying that I do something weirdly after he saw me praying."

This therefore shows the lack of understanding associated with the religion of Islam which deters the student from having high esteem as he will be pointed fingers by other students who may then put labels on them thus reducing his academic excellence. This points to the need of being equal with other students by the Muslim students at the institution for them to fulfil all their spiritual, academic and physical capabilities.

4. Pressure to Defend Themselves and Their Religion

As was pointed out by Ahmad (2016), similarly, the study unravels the tenet of the students having a double layered foundation as they will be carrying out their studies. This is so because those students who visibly appear as Muslims through their dressing as well as their names tend to be pressurized to behave in a certain way as well as refute the negative claims from their colleagues and lecturers as they are visible representatives of their Islamic community. Therefore, they tend to be pressured to defend themselves and their religion during lectures, debates with peers as well as group discussions at the campuses. During the in-depth interviews, six of the participants shared the same sentiments. One female student said:

> *"Usually when the class is having a lecture or discussion on Islamic issues, most lecturers tend to call out my name and lecture to the whole class as well as support some of the antics which are totally contradictory to my religion and by this, I tend to be in a dilemma as to the element of defending my religion and nullify the facts which the lecturer or the students may pose. It is good that they call me to present information from a firsthand source but at times I wish I could not wear the veil so that they will not know that I am a Muslim because since my first year, I have been defending my religion and at times some lecturers feel challenged when I refute what they might be saying and this has been putting my academics at risks because of it."*

The above statements show the fatigue the participant had in terms of defending her religion. Muslim students at times go to an extent of refuting the claims of their lecturers in front of other students which may seems as a challenge to their knowledge base. This therefore puts the students' academic performance at risk as they tend to be in fear of being failed by them. In line with the above, another participant had this to say;

> *"Team Boko Haram, those guys do not have care with life as they may tend to kill themselves to kill you" and they started laughing. This emotionally moved me and I had to take a stand to defend my religion and I quickly told the one who spoke that he had a wrong and negative perception of the religion and I am glad he then told me to explain and I pointed out various tenets which apparently convinced him pertain the religion of Islam and sine that day, he has been my friend since then"*

The above shows the hustle the participant had in order to refute the negative claims on his religion. An analysis of the above is in agreement with the study by Shah (2017) whereby he elucidates that most Muslim students at non-Muslim environments tend to be negatively portrayed by their fellow colleagues who are mainly brainwashed with the how the media portrays the religion of Islam and this then affects the academic performance of the students since they tend to be focused on defending themselves and their religion as well as focus on their studies.

5. Discrimination

Discrimination is another challenge which emerged during the course of the study. The female participants revealed that they tend to suffer from tenets of discrimination institutionally. Due to their dress code, they pointed out that they tend to get institutional as well as interactional discrimination from their non-Muslim peers. Those who usually wear their veil which is referred to as the *Hijab* pointed out that they encountered and some still encounter discrimination at the institution because of their religious outfits and this supports the study carried out by Shah (2017). Showing dissatisfaction, one of the participants expressed:

> *"I am an athlete since high school and I have been doing athletics taking part in 100 meter as well as 200 meter races as well as marathons with my veil on me. However, all this has changed since I have entered university as I have encountered verbal abuse one day when I visited the training grounds and I have never ever visited them again. Therefore, this has shown that I was discriminated by those who were at the field and ever since that day I have not been active in terms of sports lately."*

The above shows the element of discrimination the participant encountered from other students at the grounds, and this has deterred her to effectively and fully function at the institution. This in a way therefore reduces the facets such as discrimination, hence resulting in an environment in which the students function effectively cognitively, psychologically, socially, spiritually and academically. This finding supports the study carried out by Ahmed (2016) in which the Muslim students interviewed by the researcher outlined problems of discrimination due to their faith at American institutions as they are associated with terrorists. This therefore reduces their full functioning and capacity at the institutions as they will have an inferiority complex which is the case with the current study in which the participant revealed the facet of no longer going to the training fields as well as take part in extracurricular activities at the institution due to discrimination she faced once.

Conclusion

The research study was undertaken in a bid to unravel Islamophobia which currently takes place in public space in Zimbabwe. The findings of the study put bare the various challenges encountered by Muslim students as a result of Islamophobia. Due to the fact that they are a minority, they tend to be ignored as well as their perceived needs and concerns which in a way make their life at public universities hard to live. Apart from stigmatization, institutional and religious discrimination, as well as being denied their religious rights, Muslim students in non-Muslim spaces also tend to have a broken social life as they are perceived negatively in the learning community. Thus, the study is vital in influencing policy makers to improve the welfare of minority groups such as Muslims. The study may help in challenging university authorities to embrace diversity and inclusivity in their institutions. This research is also vital for knowledge and a pathway for future research in human rights professions in relation to the upholding of rights of the religious minority groups in public universities in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

The following are instrumental ways in improving the campus life of Muslim students at higher learning institutions in Zimbabwe:

- The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission should investigate cases of discrimination of members of minority religious groups at colleges and universities.
- Islamic religious organisations should carry out awareness campaigns on the religion of Islam to enhance the knowledge individuals have about the religion as this may help clear misconceptions.
- Universities and colleges should organize panel discussions and public lectures that open for knowledge on Islam enabling people to ask and know more about the religion.
- Universities should promote formation of vibrant Islamic student's societies.
- The government of Zimbabwe should ensure inclusion of Islamic cultural and religious holidays on the national calendar to foster an inclusive and diverse environment for all.
- Universities should train lecturers to be impartial when carrying out discussions on religions in lecture rooms.

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