

Local

IN MY VIEW

COVID-19 and the hidden face of idolatry



By Nejouad Al-Yagout

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We hear it often: COVID-19 knows no nationality. And yes that is true. It doesn't. But we do. We not only know nationality, we know nationalism. Both locals and expatriates are getting infected, but all we hear is how the latter are the cause. We forget to take into account the ratio of foreigners to locals and the living spaces of both. We also forget to take into account the fact that both citizens and non-citizens are flouting regulations, secretly and openly.

We also hear: COVID-19 does not differentiate between the rich and poor. And, again, it doesn't. But we do. This pandemic has infected politicians, celebrities, millionaires and royals. But still: How many times have we heard that it is low income workers who are to blame for the spread of the disease? How often do we ignore the tragic fact that low income workers are at much greater risk of exposure because of unfortunate circumstances? They are crammed into apartments, cannot afford not to go to work, and their responsibilities entail mixing in crowds and interacting with many. They are on the front-lines, but nobody considers them heroes. In fact, we see them as a burden—something we need to rid our country of, now and when this is over.

This underlying mistrust of the so-called 'other' is a phenomenon that is prevalent all over the world. It is not just happening in our country. In fact, in some other nations, we hear news of individuals who are being assaulted because they are told they brought the disease to the countries in question. Though minorities were assaulted and derided prior to this pandemic, COVID-19 has made our voices louder, here and everywhere. Because now we have a reason to close borders and get rid of minorities. Because now we have a reason to implement our nationalistic ideals in the face of a perceived threat. Because now we have a reason to blame foreigners for not only our health issues but financial hardships and social woes.

Many experts are predicting unpleasant scenarios of unrest when this is over; when we begin to assess the economic fallout and trauma. We failed at uniting in the face of a common threat, so we can only envision that people will continue to point fingers. And the scapegoats, as modern-day theorists and the tragic chapters of our collective history remind us, will be minorities. If we do not shed our prejudices, a more virulent form of nationalism than the one we see now will come to life. This mutated nationalism will give leaders further justification to expel as many immigrants as possible and implement harsher laws for those seeking entry.

And, in our country, as ever, we will turn a blind eye to employers who postpone the payment of basic salaries to their employees. We will forgive those who engage in human trafficking; we will protect the powerful ones who exploit migrant workers who came here only to find they have no jobs—after giving their life savings, or money they borrowed from loan sharks, to someone who has the law on his side. We will offer to send illegal immigrants home, under the pretext of amnesty, to "purge" our country of the workers who we exploited in the first place; and we will continue to applaud and vote for leaders whose anti-expatriate rhetoric resonates with the prejudices that lurk within us.

God-willing, this is not the case. Perhaps we will realize that we are headed for destruction and thwart it by speaking on behalf of our fellow human beings or refusing to be a part of this cult of divisiveness. Maybe we can remember it is our religious duty to help "...the poor, the traveler, and the one who asks" (Quran 2:177). And perhaps we can remember that "...God forbids immorality, injustice, oppression" (Quran 16:90).

When we worship our country, we are committing idolatry. Nationalism is a form of idolatry. Yes, it is awe-inspiring to respect the laws, to love our country, and to protect it; but not when it is at the expense of non-citizens. This is when we must refrain from worshipping our nationalistic identity to following God, who "...loves those who act justly" (Quran 60:8). And it is unjust to treat others with contempt. It is unjust to make others feel inferior. Allah states that He created "nations and tribes [so we may] know one another" (Quran 49:13). How can we know each other when we drive each other away? How can we know each other when we divide our nation into us vs them?

In this sacred month of Ramadan, may we remember that not only does COVID-19 know no nationality nor social status, but we don't either. May God guide us to the ways of inclusivity and harmony, so that we become known for our hospitality and humility. May we stand united as we navigate unknown terrain. And may we remember that we were "...created from one soul" (Quran 4:1; Quran 7:189). Allahuma ameen.

(Side-note: And, for now, maybe, just maybe, COVID-19 has to stick around much longer than we anticipated in order to give us the time we surely need to awaken from our stupor of separation).

People conserve as total curfew makes it difficult to secure needs

Residents concerned after seeing baqalas closed during 'exercise' period



KUWAIT: Shops are closed at the Mubarakiya Market in Kuwait City during the 20-day nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on May 11, 2020. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



A cat lingers in front of covered stalls in Kuwait City.

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: During the total lockdown, people are stuck with family, friends and even alone for 22 hours, and only allowed to walk and breathe the fresh air from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm. "I bought some food good for a few days. I don't know if it would even last for 20 days. I have canned food, some whole chickens and some fresh and frozen veggies, knowing that we will be at home for some time," said June, a resident of Salmiya block 9.

"One thing is for sure. If I don't buy food in the next few days, the stocks will be over. I don't want to buy anything until the curfew is over, but I have two kids. I will cook just enough for us so it can last a few days," she said. "On the first day of lockdown at 4:30 pm, I went around my neighborhood to see if baqalas were open; unfortunately they were all closed, so I am very concerned now," she said, referring to the period in which walking exercise is allowed daily.

The problem is compounded for those under lockdown for many weeks in Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. Janet, an assistant teacher in an English school in Kuwait, lives with her three fellow teachers in Mahboula, with very limited stocks in their fridge.

Double lockdown

"We are used to the lockdown, but this is a double lockdown for us. We are surviving because our embassy is providing us with some supplies. For the next 20 days, we only have three whole chickens left, a few cans of food, and thank God 10 kg of rice. We will try to use our few remaining supplies slowly till



Unpaid workers survive on handouts

the end of the month," she said. "Maybe we will cook less and less every day. We need to survive these trying times and we hope everything will be fine."

Janet also expects food supplies will be added more to deliveries to people who are in the lockdown areas for weeks. "We have been suffering for long,

They are distributing food, but supplies are not enough for many; that is why you see the long queue of people when they are distributing food, because they all want something. We Filipinos don't queue because we know it's not even enough for the people waiting in the long queue every day. There is also the possibility you will get the coronavirus in the queue since there is no social distancing," she said.

Vijay, an Indian restaurant worker, has not been paid since March. He said he is surviving with the support of his friends. He is a "bachelor" and has been living with a Filipino family in a flat in Salmiya. "I am surviving because of friends who are supplying some food for weeks. I only eat whatever is given to me as I have no more money," he said.

Kuwait has offered a grocery shopping service during curfew, which can be accessed by making an appointment online at www.moci.shop to shop at co-operative societies or supermarkets located in the shopper's same area of residence. An appointment can be made once every six days for a 30-minute shopping period. The government had reassured the public that supplies at local markets were efficient to meet demand during the curfew period which lasts until May 30.



A view shows a deserted playground near Kuwait Towers during the lockdown in Kuwait City.



A view shows boats moored at the marina of Souq Sharq mall during lockdown.

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