

Women in Different ‘Societal’ Roles and Responsibilities: An Investigation through Islamic Connotations and Teachings

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Abstract

The study in hand highlights different societal roles women assume in a Muslim Society compromising on their social, civic or other rights as human being. Women, being a considerable proportion of a society, assume a number of roles and responsibilities. Likewise; Muslim societies provide women different opportunities to work in different permitted capacities. Basically these roles and responsibilities are categorized into mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. These roles have been categorically discussed in the light of Islamic injunctions and teachings. This study covers these four basic aspects of a Muslim woman. Women rights and obligations have been the core theme of this study which provides a comprehensive survey in direct and simplified manner. The Research methodology is qualitative one with an embedded literature view. An effort has been made to use modern authentic sources on the theme. The approach is both empirical and impartial. Islamic view has equally been defended while respecting *the other views. However; an effort has been made to quantify the facts described qualitatively.*

Keywords: Islam; Culture; Misconceptions; Social Roles; Social Stigma; Oppressive Dictatorship

Woman’s Roles and Responsibilities-An Overview of Different Misconceptions

Islamic civilization, right from its start in the form of *Din e Hanif* (Barahamic Religion), has given women their due roles to perform in order to build up a normal society which is need of the hour and it is also a theme of hot debate in both East and West. Especially the people out of Islamic domain question their gender as well as physical roles with a number of negative connotations or “stereotype stigmas” which force women to feel themselves hampered or to be dependent on others especially the males of the society simply compromising on their individuality.

The first and foremost perception about the life of women in Muslim society is the dictatorship of their male family members who, in turn, force them to marry against their will or to wear veil. As per Islamic injunctions, women are free to choose their couple and share this will with their elders in order arrange marriage afterwards. Any marriage against the will of a woman is quite illegal and has no social status, and the local cultures where Islamic teachings are not respected, it is the responsibility of the statute of law that it must come into action to ease the situation.

As far as the prime duty of a woman is concerned, it is a universal admitted fact that her duty is to raise children as per need of a healthy and positive society and prove to be a good wife. Almost all the societies of the world encourage and promote this very role of the women. In Islam, home is considered as a system consolidated though the institution of marriage and definitely a woman is not sole performer of the domestic duties; rather she is equally assisted by her husband who has been ordained to earn

livelihood. A woman in Islamic society is free of economic liabilities and it is the husband who is solely responsible to provide all the necessities and facilities of life. Moreover; she is not solely responsible to nurture the offspring and perform different domestic duties like preparing meals, washing clothes and cleaning house and she must be assisted by her husband in all such engagements. However; this is not end of a woman's life. Her roles and responsibilities have been readdressed with the ever-changing needs of the society. as a domestic maid, her role has been reorganized into a social worker as per her capacities and capabilities ranging from having a job in an office environment to casting of vote; engaging her into a political activity; running a business as a business enterprise owner.

Interestingly; in an Islamic society all these roles need no justification. They are free to work as breadwinners keeping in view their domestic settings and in this way no social stigmas can be associated with their adopted roles and which can be considered to overshadow their gender in general.

Generally speaking; all the stigmas which the outsiders associate with the women in a Muslim society are actually associated with other societies too. Even in western cultures women face a number of bans while they try to adopt a particular job or profession. They have to compromise on her domestic or married life; even they have to compromise the proper care of their children.

Another misconception associated with the women in a Muslim society is the denial of their right of education which is baseless on the ground that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) set an example by educating his wives and daughters. His first marriage was to a widow Hazrat Khadijah who was running a successful business enterprise. She was a lady of versatile capacities and capabilities of leadership and

management. Hence; in different Muslim societies in the past, women continued to excel in almost every field of interest, ranging from works of art, architecture and literature to the fields of warfare. In the days of consolidated Muslim rule, it was the duty of Khalifa to provide education to women folk and give prestigious jobs to women of caliber and expertise. That’s why Muslim society both respects and encourages the women to be highly educated and capacitated in order to meet the modern day requirements. Muslim societies are making necessary arrangements for women education both at academic and professional levels.

Literature Review

Allah Almighty created both man and woman as “moral equals” fulfilling the same range of duties regarding worship, prayer and fasting, faith and its manifestation into religious practices ranging from fasting, almsgiving, conduct and morality, from market to pilgrimage to Holy Places. Women’s different roles in social, economic, religious, and ethical domains are subject of discussion from the very first day. Islam introduced a number of reforms and redefined and redesigned these roles on bases of their bio-physical, psychological and other social and societal needs. That’s why these roles were considered by impartial researchers as genuine, reality-based, close-to-nature and meeting all needs of the hour. Hence the literature available on the theme under discussion is both vast and versatile encompassing the theories, viewpoints, approaches, ethos and dogmas of almost all the schools of thoughts ranging from retrogressive to the progressives of all shades and colors. We can take start from any point of ponder. For instance; we come across a very valuable source “Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures” from the platform of Brill which prelims into five volumes encompassing thematic as well as disciplinary entries based on methodologies, paradigms and sources for studying women and Islamic cultures; bibliography of books and articles in European Languages since 1993; Women and Islamic cultural paradigms

family, law and politics; their economics, education mobility and space; their practices, interpretations and many other intrigues and connotations on the theme on anvil. On the row another work of worth mentioning is “Extraordinary Women from the Muslim World (2008)” edited by Natalie Maydell, et al, by global content publishing, New York, USA. It comprises of the biographies of notable and exemplary Muslim women from the preliminary years of Islam to the 20th Century AD. These women belong to various fields of life as some are religious figures, literary figures while others are political figures. Although this work is of preliminary nature yet it provides a great insight into the theme and thus proves beacon light for advanced researchers of the mainstream strata. As far as the contents of the “Oxford Dictionary of Islam” are concerned, one can find a very balanced and healthy discussion supporting our view point covered in the forthcoming discussion on the theme in hand. For instance the discussion on the women’s societal roles is concluded as:

“The historical record shows that Muhammad consulted women and weighed their opinions seriously. At least one woman, Umm Waraqah , was appointed imam over her household by Muhammad. Women contributed significantly to the canonization of the *Quran*. A woman is known to have corrected the authoritative ruling of Caliph Umar on dowry. Women prayed in mosques unsegregated from men, were involved in hadith transmission, gave sanctuary to men, engaged in commercial transactions, were encouraged to seek knowledge, and were both instructors and pupils in the early Islamic period. Muhammad's last wife, Aisha, was a well-known authority in medicine, history, and rhetoric. The *Quran* refers to women who pledged an oath of allegiance to Muhammad independently of their male kin. Some distinguished women converted to Islam prior to their husbands, a demonstration of Islam's recognition of their capacity for independent action. Caliph Umar appointed

women to serve as officials in the market of Medina. Biographies of distinguished women, especially in Muhammad's household, show that women behaved relatively autonomously in early Islam. In Sufi circles, women were recognized as teachers, adherents, "spiritual mothers," and even inheritors of the spiritual secrets of their fathers."

Here is a critical study of different societal roles and responsibilities in the light of Islamic teachings:

Mother: Heavenly Face of the Woman

In Islam, the status of mother has been highly prestigious one. As per saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that the Paradise lays underneath the feet of mothers highlight the sanctity of the exalted rank of mothers in the eyes of Allah and His Prophet (PBUH). According to Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, one of the companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) inquired about to whom priority should be given while treating parents. 'Mother' should fairly be treated at first was the reply. Same was repeated thrice in reply to the same query; 'father' was the reply at fourth stance.

Overall both parents deserve just and fair treatment in Islam because both are source of Allah's benevolence in favour of their children. ¹ Especially; mother has been termed as major 'source of benevolence according to Quranic injunctions; as it has been proclaimed in Surah Luqman:

And we have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents in travail upon travail. Did his mother bear him; and in years twain was his weaning (hear the command show gratitude to me and to your parents. To me is (your final) goal.²

As a mother has to bear both pain and trouble during pregnancy and delivery afterwards, her status and respect has been exalted in Islam. Although all the acts of upbringing a child are a joint responsibility of parents but a mother enjoys a special status on account of her physical and mental sacrifices during the entire period of 'motherhood'. She goes through the process of life and death during labor and afterwards feeds the child at the cost of her own health and cares the child at the cost of her sleep as well peace of mind which is definitely not an easy task. As father's roles are beyond this physical and mental domain of mother's; hence she has been bestowed exalted status and rank by Allah Almighty.³

As a matter of fact a considerable number of Holy Prophet (PBUH)'s sayings draw one's attention towards the conduct one should assume with the mother. They stress upon obedience, politeness and fair treatment with the sanctity of a mother. Fair and just treatment to parents; especially to the mother is the very prime teaching of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He said:

Each one, I enjoin, to honor his (or her) mother, I enjoin each one to honor his (or her) mother (three time) I enjoin each one to honor his (or her) father, I enjoin each one to honor his guardian who is taking care of him, even if he is causing him some annoyance.⁴

Some people argue that due to the weak status in the society, mothers have been given more importance in Islam. It might be true to some extent but no evidence supports this notion clearly. Albeit; this is an admitted fact that mother enjoys just and fair status in Islam and a source of atonement and attainment of Paradise to her offspring.

As per Hazrat Ayesha (R.A.), Hazrat Harisa bin Nauman (R.A.) was very much respectful, polite and kind with her mother and he was seen reciting the Holy Quran in Paradise in a dream of the Holy Prophet. On inquiry, the Holy Prophet was told by the inhabitants of Paradise that Allah Almighty rewarded Harisa bin Nauman with this exalted status on the fair treatment to his mother.⁵

As per saying of the Holy Prophet narrated by one of His companions, Hazrat Abu Hurairah, once the Holy Prophet was questioned by a person that who would be the best deserver of his fair treatment or polite conduct? The Holy Prophet replied thrice that the sanctity of the mother. However; when he repeated the question of "what next?" for the fourth time; he was replied as "your father".⁶

Aliah Schleifer (1986), in her book, "Motherhood in Islam" refers to this saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that He once said that "Do not leave your mother unless she sanctions permission unto you or she dies. If you serve your mother it is indeed a great deed to be rewarded by the Allah Almighty. He who kisses her mother between her eyes would surely be protected from the fire of the Hell. If I had one of my parents; especially my mother and she called me while I would have been in prayer, I would reply to her call during prayer. Allah has prohibited every kind of rudeness to mother."

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This reveals the importance and significance given to the mother in Islam. No other religion has gives such a elevated place to the mother who has the greatest and noblest role in building a family by bearing caring, rearing, and destiny of the future generation is in the hands of the mother good and morally strong mothers would build the society with the same qualities and attributes as their own. Such mothers have given birth to the greatest leader of the world, both Muslim and non-Muslims. Such great women can

help promote better societies and nations to make the world worth living like a paradise. According to the saying of the Holy Prophet of Islam, in answer to a question, repeated three times, that among the parents who deserves most the respect and kindness, it was said each time your mothers, your mother, your mother and when the same question was repeated for the fourth time, it was said your father. This reveals the importance and significance given to the mother in Islam.

Daughters- the Softest Face of Women:

In the *Jahiliyyah* Period, daughters were considered an inferior creature. They were termed as “shame”, ignominy or disgrace to their fathers as the sons considered as “Gifts of Heaven”. Parents felt ashamed after the birth of a baby girl and in some Arab tribe killing of daughters at early stage of their life was a heinous ritual. “Son” was termed as “strength” to his father, an assistant to both his house and business.⁸

Islam not only curbed this cruel conduct at the part of the parents, but also advised to treat both genders on equal footing. Furthermore they were advised to be kinder to the daughters. Islam prohibited killing of daughters as Allah Almighty had created them and it was Allah’s will to create a baby girl instead of a baby boy. Allah likes those who are kind with their daughters and has announced a number of rewards in the world and the life hereafter for those who up bring daughters with great affection and love. Surely; both honor and disgrace are in the hands of Allah Almighty and it is not associated with the birth of a son or daughter. As per Surah Shura:

To Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. He creates what he wills (and plans). He bestows (children) male or

female according to his will (and plan), or he bestows both males and females and he leaves barren whom he will for he is full of knowledge and power.⁹

There are a number of *Ahadith* (sayings) of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) which point out the importance of daughters in the eyes of Islam. For example, Hazrat Ibn e Abbas, one of cousins of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) has reported that that the Holy Prophet has given great news of conferring of Paradise for whom who is gentle to his daughters and brings her up with great respect, fair-mindedness and affection. As per Hazrat Anas bin Malik (R. A.), the Holy Prophet termed daughters as prime focus of affection and sympathy. A person having one daughter would be protected from the fire of Hell; having two would be admitted to Paradise and a person having three daughters would be exempted from the obligations of Jihad and Charity.¹⁰

As per report of Hazrat Abu Hurairah, the Holy Prophet said that a person bringing up three daughters would surely be admitted to Paradise; and for a person, as per Abdullah bin Mas’ud, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) has been reported to have declared if a baby girl is born to him and he nourishes her and provides her with good education and training, He himself would be between that father and the fire of Hell.¹¹

The Holy Prophet (PBUH), not contented with moral exhortation, set a glorious example of treating four daughters with prime parental love and compassion. He set a great tradition to follow. He was a model of respect, candidness and affection for fathers, up bringing His all the daughters fair-mindedly and fair-heartedly from childhood to youth and He continued to care and look after them even after their marriages. He declared that Fatima, His youngest daughter was the part of His body and soul.¹²

Sisters- the Pride of Brothers

According to the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), following rights have been conferred upon woman as a sister:

1. As per Quranic injunctions, the sister has been declared 'entitled to get share in inheritance' if the deceased leaves behind no parents and no child; however, has a brother or sister on mother's side, the sister and brother would get $1/6^{\text{th}}$ each. In case of being more than two, they would get $1/3^{\text{rd}}$.
2. A childless person, survived by no parents and leaves behind full or consanguine sister, would be entitled to one half of the property and in case of two or more sisters, their share would be reduced to two-thirds of that left property. The share of two sisters will be equal to one brother, if there are both brothers and sisters exist.
If a man dies childless and also is not survived by parents, but leaves behind full or consanguine sister, she would be entitled to one-half of the estate and in case of two or more such sisters, they would share equally in two-third of the estate. But if there are brothers and sisters both, the share of two females would be equal to that of one male.
3. Islam prohibits Muslims for marriage with mothers, daughters, sisters, mother's sisters and father's sisters.¹³

In Islam, having close association with relatives, especially with the immediate family-members such as brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, etc has highly been encouraged and termed as 'beauty of society'. Muslims, as the Holy Prophet (PBUH) stressed upon the followers, should be kind and cooperative with their close relations.¹⁴

According to Hazrat Abu Saeed, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) has reported to have said, 'whosoever has three daughters or three sisters; or two daughters or two sisters and he shows a good conduct with them and fears Allah Almighty in this matter, He has a (special) place for such person in Heaven. A similar saying has been reported by Hazrat Abdullah Bin Abbas, according to which the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was reported to give surety of admittance into Paradise to a person who takes care of three daughters (or same number of sisters), trains them, and is very kind to them.¹⁵

These and such other sayings of the Holy Prophet manifest this core fact that anyone who renders his services for upbringing baby girls or his sisters would definitely secure his place in Heaven. Thus; sister attains a special status as her brothers would get the same reward as acquired by her father by nourishing daughters.¹⁶ This is the beauty of Allah's Benevolence that He respects humanly relations benefitting the society.

Wife- a Jewel Within

Both the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) advocate the fair treatment of wives. As per injunctions of Surah Baqra, the rights of a woman as wife are to be enlisted as:

1. Wife is jewel and garment of her husband. Allah knows the sanctity and sensitivity of this relation and he often forgives smaller bickering if arise.
2. A husband has a fair inclination to his wife; so he could approach her as and when he wants or vice versa; however, they should behave with each other gently; especially the husband should fear Allah Almighty while treating with his wife.

3. Both genders enjoy the similar rights; however, men have a slighter advantage over women (regarding some societal roles).
4. Divorce with reason is not a prohibited act but the women should be given some suitable gifts if they have been divorced.¹⁷

Islam advocates respect, love and intimacy among a couple. That's why, divorce, even if the legal one is equally disliked by Allah Almighty. The Holy Quran supports this notion in the following words:

This is one of the signs of Allah Almighty that He made couples from or among the people; so that they may enjoy peace of mind. Moreover; He created (feelings of) love and affection in their hearts. This is sign for those who think.¹⁸

It simply means that the manifestation of love and affection between couples is the prime requisite to run the institution of 'family', which in turn is the basic unit of community or society. This urge, quite natural one, is necessary to develop healthy social and moral values.

Islam emphasizes a husband to respect legal and social rights of his wife and should behave with her in a polite and decent manner, and this must be continued throughout the life span of the relation. A husband albeit does not like some of the physical and mental traits of his wife should consider better traits or positive aspects of her personality. As per the Holy Quran:

“On the contrary live with them on a forting of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them; it may be that ye dislike a thing, and God brings about through it a great deal of good.”¹⁹

This manifestation of the institution of 'marriage' is based on mutual understanding, act of kindness, love and affection, companionship as well as harmony of dealing and interaction. As a matter of fact, a husband is a true friend of her wife and life partner who is destined to protect and cherish her and lends her a cooperative hand through every thick and thin of the journey of life.²⁰ Husband and wife are just like garments for each other destined to provide comfort, protection and support to each other.²¹

Husband-wife relation as a 'cherished piece of clothing' is a symbol of comfort, security and a sense of secrecy and sanctity, a feeling of respecting privacy and sensitivity of the relation, destined to conceal and cover what is private in the eyes of the world. The Holy prophet (PBUH) laid great stress upon behaving decently with wife. He sensitized this issue by declaring those who were best in conduct and relation with their wives as His 'most perfect believers as well as followers.

As per one of the sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), as narrated by Hazrat Hakim Bin Muawiah who, in turn, narrated from his father that somebody inquired the Holy Prophet (PBUH) about the rights of a wife over her husband. The Holy Prophet replied that a husband should feed her wife as he feeds himself; he should provide her clothes as he provides himself; and he should not slap her (ever) on face or try to disfigure her, and should not (ever) abandon her except for some time within the house for the sake of maintenance of discipline.²²

In His last sermon at the time of the first and the last pilgrimage [Khutba Hajjatul Wad'a], the Holy Prophet did not forget to mention the sanctity of this relation and stressed upon the audience to be kind with their wives and give special attention to their multifarious rights by saying:

O people! Verily you have got certain rights over your women and your women have certain rights over you. It is your right upon them to honor their conjugal rights.²³

Moreover, He (PBUH) protected property rights of the husband and wife:

Behold it is not permissible for a woman to give anything from the wealth of her husband to anyone but with his consent. Treat the women kindly, since they are your helpers and are not in a position to manage their affairs themselves. Fear Allah concerning women, for verily you have taken them on security of Allah and have made their persons lawful unto you by words of Allah.²⁴

Women, for the sake of convenience, may take the responsibility of the domestic affairs but this is not the legal requirement as directed by Islam; it is quite more obligation and husband should lend her wife a helping hand in domestic trifles. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) set a golden example by helping His wives in daily routine of life.

On factual grounds, both husband and wife have equal as well as joint roles and responsibilities in meeting daily routines as well as up bringing their children.

In a Muslim society a woman, whether single or married one, is viewed as ‘a person enjoying her own rights’ not as ‘an adjunct to her husband’. For example; a woman enjoys the full right of ownership and disposal of her own property, and even after marriage she may retain her own family name. In Islam, marriage is not considered as ‘reparation’ but rather ‘a legal, binding contract’ between a man and woman with a commitment to live together as per teachings of Islam.²⁵

Coherence and Conclusion

Islamic law emphasizes the contractual nature of marriage, requiring that a dowry be paid to the woman rather than to her family, and guaranteeing women's rights of inheritance and to own and manage property. Women were also granted the right to live in the matrimonial home and receive financial maintenance during marriage and a waiting period following death and divorce.

As a matter of fact no woman held religious titles in Islam, but many women held political power, some jointly with their husbands, others independently. The best-known women rulers in the pre-modern era include Khayzuran , who governed the Muslim Empire under three Abbasid caliphs in the eighth century; Malika Asma bint Shihab al-Sulayhiyya and Malika Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhiyya , who both held power in Yemen in the eleventh century; Sitt al-Mulk , a Fatimid queen of Egypt in the eleventh century; the Berber queen Zaynab al-Nafzawiyah (r.1061–1107); two thirteenth-century Mamluk queens, Shajar al-Durr in Cairo and Radiyyah in Delhi; six Mongol queens, including Kutlugh Khatun (thirteenth century) and her daughter Padishah Khatun of the Kutlugh-Khanid dynasty; the fifteenth-century Andalusian queen Aishah al-Hurra , known by the Spaniards as Sultana Madre de Boabdil ; Sayyida al-Hurra , governor of Tetouán in Morocco (r. 1510–1542); and four seventeenth-century Indonesian queens.

There are a number of burning hypotheses pin pointing the attention of the researchers including:

1. The status of women in pre-modern Islam in general conformed not to Quranic ideals but to prevailing patriarchal cultural norms. As a result, improvement of the status of women became a major issue in modern, reformist Islam.

2. Since the mid-nineteenth century, men and women have questioned the legal and social restrictions on women, especially regarding education, seclusion, strict veiling, polygamy, slavery, and concubine.

In response to these hypotheses, especially the Western Women have published works advocating reforms, established schools for girls, opposed veiling and polygamy, and engaged in student and nationalist movements. Nationalist movements as well as new states that emerged in the post–World War II period, perceived women and gender issues as crucial to social development. State policies enabled groups of women to enter the male-dominated political sphere and professions previously closed to them, although these policies often caused popular and religious backlash.

Debates continue over the appropriate level of female participation in the public sphere. Women are typically viewed as key to either reforming or conserving tradition because of their roles in maintaining family, social continuity, and culture. Women's status has also been used as a means of defining national identity. Although governments of twentieth-century Muslim nation-states have promoted education for both boys and girls as a means of achieving economic growth, the percentage of girls enrolled in schools in developing countries with large and rapidly growing populations remains low. Concern for men's jobs has given added incentive to the conservative call for women to adhere to traditional roles as housewives and mothers, although economic necessity has led women to undertake whatever work they can find, usually low-paid, unskilled labor. War and labor migration have increased the number of female-headed households.

Women today are active participants in grassroots organizations; development projects; economic, education, health, and political projects; relief efforts; charitable

associations; and social services. Modern reforms have made polygamous marriages rational; permitted wives to sue for divorce in religious courts, particularly in cases of cruelty, desertion, or dangerous contagious diseases; provided women with the right to contract themselves in marriage; required husbands to find housing for a divorced wife while she has custody over the children; increased the minimum age for spouses; limited the ability of guardians to contract women in marriage against their wishes; provided opportunities for minor girls wed against their wishes to abrogate the marriage upon reaching majority; enhanced the rights of women with regard to child custody; and allowed women to write clauses into marriage contracts in order to balance the authority with their husbands. Hence; it can safely be concluded that Islamic connotations pose no hurdles rather they rationalize the societal roles of women.

The above-mentioned facts about different societal roles and responsibilities point to the prime fact that women have no compulsion while assuming them in a Muslim society. An attempt has been made here to grasp women’s roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. In the introductory paragraphs, different misconceptions regarding the societal roles and responsibilities have been encompassed and discussed comprehensively; especially the misconceptions of the West have been taken into account and it has been tried hard to address them factually. This study is, in fact, a survey of the abovementioned roles and responsibilities of women folk in a Muslim society. The material found on the subject is although voluminous one yet it manifests a simple fact that women’s roles and responsibilities are on change, keeping in view the modern day requirements.

This study is also a response to the notion that the roles and responsibilities assumed by women have continuously been projected as ‘worthless’ and ‘incompatible’ with the

modern day sociology; and the projectionists of this ideologue simply ignores the fact that ‘Muslim History reveals the progressive nature of women’s roles.’ Muslim women are struggling hard to recognize themselves as an effective and inevitable part of the society, rejecting the very criticism, especially of Western think tanks.

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