Toward 'Prussian Virtues': Transforming the Civil Service in Muslim Countries into a Factor of Political Stability

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Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit bis an dein kühles Grab;

Und weiche keinen Finger breit von Gottes Wegen ab ...

(Always practice honesty and loyalty until your cool grave;

And don't depart even the width of a finger from God's ways...)¹

Lyrics to the melody of the carillon of the former

Garnisonkirche at Potsdam, Germany

Looking Beyond the Next Regime-Change

One of the regrettable features which put many Muslim countries – although by no means only them – apart from their contemporaries in the West is the internal instability of their respective political structures. Since their independence from Britain and France, Arab regimes in the Middle East in particular went through myriads of military coups: every time a new regime came to power, not only the *political* framework but also the *social* and *administrative* setting was affected negatively. As loyalties of the members of the civil service – from top down to bottom – were seen as being due merely to the (mostly military) ruler of the day rather than to the nation as a whole, entire structures were at the time of upheaval 'replaced' with those who share the political convictions of the new regime in power – to the detriment of the country as a whole. The recent upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East, seem to confirm this.

Most affected by such a bleak setting is usually the administrative sector, which has to start from 'zero' every time a new regime comes to power. This is one of the reasons why Muslim countries in general are often lagging behind in terms of development and economic and technological progress as not much initiative can be expected from new administrative staff under such a potentially (life-)threatening scenario. Corruption on a massive scale – 'making money' quickly before the next regime-change is coming – is another key characteristic.

In recent decades, many Muslim nations have become disenchanted with previously popular British, French, and US-American 'models' when it comes to the issue of how to govern one's own country. Many of them have dismissed 'the West' *indiscriminately* – often for mainly ideological reasons or internal motivations

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and populism, one might argue – and have looked for alternatives in ‘the East’: Japan and a ‘Look East’ policy, for instance, were popular in Malaysia until that model too had to be phased out in the aftermath of the disastrous Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s.

As this writer would argue, however, ‘the West’ does not just consist in the former ‘colonial masters’ France and Britain. And as the United States (*vide* the recent global financial crisis) and Soviet Russia (which has left the scene in the meantime) too had been able to have a constructive impact, another model of the past would be worth looking at: Germany, which – especially in its efficient working-ethics – was for decades moulded by its most powerful state – Prussia. It had been mainly its ‘Prussian ethics’ and ‘values’ which enabled Germany and her people to survive the First and Second World Wars – and to come out of both of them almost ‘as if nothing has happened’.

Moreover, Prussia and the ‘Prussian model’ share also numerous common traits with core Islamic values and can therefore be of use when looking at a renewal of Islamic civilisation.

Looking for Alternatives: A Country Called ‘Prussia’

Prussia² – before and after the establishment of the German Empire in 1871 – was a close friend and ally of the Ottoman Caliphate, and throughout German scholarly literature during that period Islam and Muslims were generally treated with respect.³ This circumstance would make a closer look at how the Prussians ‘did things’ more worthwhile for policy-makers in the Muslim world – and perhaps Malaysia in particular. Moreover, as Prussia (as a state) does not exist anymore and as Germany’s performance as a major power on the international scene is rather poor under its current republican system, there would be no reason to fear any ‘foreign domination’ or ‘neo-colonial plot’ – something certain other Western powers are often accused of.

For centuries, Prussia had exercised a key influence on German and European history. Prussia achieved its greatest importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, it became a leading European power under King Frederick II the Great (r. 1740–1786). Frederick, a true child of the Enlightenment, was the first monarch on the European continent to abolish torture and to place his own regime under the rule of law. He used to refer to himself as ‘the first servant of the state’. Moreover, he was also one of the first European rulers to conclude a friendship treaty with the nascent United States, and it was the Prussian Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben (1730–1794), who served as Inspector General and Major General of the Continental Army during the American War of Independence.⁴

In the nineteenth century, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck united the German principalities under Prussian leadership through three victorious wars against

Denmark (1864), Austria-Hungary (1866), and France (1870/71), and in 1871, the King of Prussia became ‘German Emperor’ (*Deutscher Kaiser*) and Germany the ‘German Empire’ (*Deutsches Reich*). During that period, Prussia dominated Germany politically and economically. Prussia’s educational reforms during that period made Germany the world’s leading power in the humanities and natural sciences, resulting in a number of Nobel Prizes for Germany which exceeded by far that of any other Western nation. German, aside from French and English, became the *lingua franca* of scholars and scientists.⁵ Many inventions and discoveries in the fields of medicine, chemistry, biology and physics which we take for granted today are the results of the German inquisitive and creative spirit, which, in turn, can be traced back to ‘Prussian virtues’.

With the end of the monarchy in Germany in 1918, Prussia became a republic (*Freistaat*) within the Reich. Already in 1917, Imperial Germany (and Prussia) had granted universal suffrage to women – even *before* either the United States or the United Kingdom decided to do so. In the early 1930s, Prussia tried to be a counterbalance against the rightist Reich Government and pit its police force in defence of civil liberties against emerging Hitlerism. It had been Prussia’s military leaders and noblemen who heroically resisted Hitler and his regime – many of them suffering martyrdom with the sacred names of God and Germany on their lips. People with prejudices against things German – in particular in the still Anglo-Saxon dominated West – might be surprised to read that Prussia as a state was abolished *de facto* already by the Nazis in 1934 and by ‘right of conquest’ by the victors of World War II in 1947 – an act which has no basis in international law whatsoever and is therefore null and void.

‘Prussian Virtues’ in Action: Continuity and Political Stability and the Relevance of the German Civil Service

In spite of the misuse of the term ‘Prussian values’ during Germany’s two disastrous experiences with totalitarianism – Nazism, followed by Soviet-sponsored Communism (the latter fortunately only in the eastern part of the country) – Prussia and the Prussian value system continue to exist in the hearts and minds of those Germans who – like this writer – earnestly hope that the current socio-political setting of self-serving politicians and political parties cannot be all what Germany and its people deserve.

Prussia rose from nothing to greatness under its ‘Prussian virtues’, a term which is usually seen as referring to an unfixed canon of several basically Lutheran values dating from the period of the European Enlightenment. But what are those ‘Prussian values’?

The following is perhaps a good overview of what is usually associated with them: (1) godliness and fear of God ('God is watching you'); (2) sincerity; (3) discipline; (4) reliability; (5) loyalty; (6) humility; (7) incorruptibility; (8) industriousness; (9) obedience (but not without frankness); (10) straightness; (11) sense of justice; (12) religious (and to a certain extent, even *political*) tolerance; (13) toughness (against *oneself* even more than against others); (14) courage and valour up to heroism and self-sacrifice; (15) sense of order; (16) sense of duty; (17) probity; (18) austerity; (19) bravery without snivelling ('learn to suffer without moaning!'); (20) subordination; (21) self-effacement ('*be* more than you *seem* to be'); (22) punctuality.

All this reads almost like a 'prediction' of the ten component principles of 'Civilisational Islam' which were envisioned by Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia's former Prime Minister: (1) faith in God and piety; (2) a just and trustworthy government; (3) a free and independent people; (4) a rigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge; (5) balanced and comprehensive economic development; (6) a good quality of life; (7) protection of the rights of women and minorities; (8) cultural and moral integrity; (9) safeguarding natural resources and the environment; and (10) strong defence capabilities.

In Germany, 'Prussian values' were particularly seen as linked to the armed forces and the civil service (*Beamtentum*). Especially, the German civil service was considered a factor of political stability and continuity – above all in times of crisis: for better or worse, their loyalty was to the *state* which was seen as something different and more enduring than a particular ruler or dynasty or a political system.

The German word for 'civil servant' is *Beamter* (plur. *Beamte*). The English term 'civil servant' is actually misleading in this case as German public employees come actually in *two* shapes: ordinary employees (*Angestellte*) and *Beamte*, a distinction that does not exist in most other national bodies of law. The original idea was that whoever represents the state by doing official duties, such as issuing official documents or making official decisions, should have a special kind of employment with the state. The concept was formalised in eighteenth-century Prussia.

Beamte, unlike all other public or private employees, lack the right to strike, which makes them a somewhat more reliable workforce – at least from the perspective of the government. The salary and working-week are defined by law and not by negotiations between employers and trade unions. As a result, in Germany today the usual working week for public employees is 38.5 hours whereas for *Beamte* it is 40 to 42 hours. Moreover, one does not become a *Beamter* by signing a contract, but rather by receiving a diploma of appointment (*Ernennungsurkunde*). The new *Beamter*'s first task is to swear an oath to uphold the federal constitution and that of the federal state in case he or she is employed by it and not by federal agencies. Under the monarchy, this oath was given to the Reich and the ruling dynasty. After some probation period, the appointment to *Beamter* is for life.

Today, the status of *Beamter* is enjoyed by the staff of public authorities and civil services, but also by policemen, soldiers and officers, most teachers and other professionals, and by holders of political offices such as mayors, ministers, etc. In Germany, *Beamte* have *permanent* tenure (i.e. they cannot normally be dismissed), receive some social security privileges, and are usually rewarded more highly than others.⁶ In addition, they are exempt from all other contributions such as pension or unemployment insurance schemes. Dismissal is possible for lengthy illness, i.e. three months within half a year. It is also possible to dismiss a *Beamter* during the probation period. After the probation period a *Beamter* can be retired and given a pension on the basis of the years of service. Based on Prussian tradition embodied in the German Constitution, German civil servants are not ‘paid’ for their work: they receive lifelong ‘alimony’ according to their station and the office they hold.

Some Conclusions and Recommendations

- There are striking similarities between most of the ‘Prussian Virtues’, as outlined above, and the ‘Ten Principles’ of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s *Islam Hadhari* concept. These similarities could well serve as a platform of civilisational dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims today, as well as for civilisational renewal *within* the world of Islam.
- By looking more closely at Prussia (and imperial Germany in particular), Muslims should be able to arrive at the conclusion that there was also ‘another West’ out there, a West, which was eager to live in mutual respect and friendship and – in the case of the Reich – even alliance with the Muslims worldwide. Still famous in this regard is the 1898 speech of Emperor Wilhelm II, assuring the then 300 million Muslims dispersed throughout the East that they would find him (and Germany) their ‘eternal friend’.
- The German civil service functioned seamlessly and efficiently under the monarchy, the ‘Weimar republic’, the Nazi regime, and the current ‘federal republic’. Although one has to admit that such a system could produce acts of heroism along with the greatest crimes against humanity as loyalty was always placed *above* conscience, one should not doubt, however, the value of the German and Prussian *Beamtentum* for internal peace and stability as well as administrative efficiency.
- Governments in the Muslim world (and perhaps even in the developing world at large) should commission studies of the German and Prussian civil service; this could be facilitated by sending civil servants from the Muslim world to Germany for research and practical training. The German model merits closer attention than other outworn Western models as – to quote Voltaire – “the better is the enemy of the good”.

- This writer is convinced that if the old ‘Prussian virtues’ were revived – without their negative counterparts – we would not have to worry about deficits, public debt, corruption, treason, disloyalty, and related problems. Some people might find even more fulfilment in regaining a sense of belonging and self-respect than in wealth and power.

The foregoing is also something which would be of use to contemporary Germany *itself* – a Germany which currently looks as if it has already ‘done away with itself’, to use Thilo Sarrazin’s pointed expression,⁷ a Germany which seems to have lost its *own* sense of identity in this ‘globalised’ world of today.

Notes

1. Melody: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; text: Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty.
2. The name *Prussia* derives from the Old Prussians, a ‘pagan’ Baltic people. In the thirteenth century, ‘Old Prussia’ was subjugated by the Teutonic Knights – German crusaders, who founded a monastic state similar to that of the Knights Hospitaller in Malta. After the Reformation, however, in the early sixteenth century, this state was secularised and became a duchy which in 1618 united with Brandenburg and was elevated to a kingdom in 1701. For an excellent overview see Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).
3. See also Christoph Marcinkowski, “Germany and the Muslim World”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 3 (April 2010), 519–22.
4. General von Steuben is credited with being one of the fathers of the Continental Army in teaching Americans the essentials of military drills, tactics, and discipline. He wrote the *Revolutionary War Drill Manual*, the book which served as the standard United States drill manual until the War of 1812. Steuben also served as General George Washington’s chief-of-staff in the final years of the War of Independence.
5. For a fascinating account of that period see Peter Watson, *The German Genius: Europe’s Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution, and the Twentieth Century* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010, 1st edition); see also the forthcoming review by Christoph Marcinkowski in *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*.
6. However, for holders of political offices the status of *Beamter* is *not* permanent and is only applicable for their period in office. Formerly, this status used to be bestowed more liberally, but privatisations and reductions in the number of established posts have reduced their number.
7. See Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* [‘Germany does away with itself: How we are gambling with our country’] (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2010, 11th printing, 2010), and the review by Christoph Marcinkowski in the present issue of this journal.