

Muslim nations should have own happiness index

Published in: New Straits Times, Friday 16 June 2017

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Source : <http://www1.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2017/06/249407/muslim-nations-should-have-own-happiness-index>

In light of socio-economic crises worldwide, “happiness” has gained traction and received much support for it to be recognised as a standard indicator for social progress, as well as an overarching goal for public policies.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, for instance, have committed themselves to redefining the development narrative, wherein the qualitative aspects of people’s wellbeing occupies the primary concern of governments. Paying attention to happiness as a multidimensional concept of growth is thus instrumental in the pursuit of human and sustainable developments.

Furthermore, the increasing attention towards subjective wellbeing as a complementary or alternative methodological indicator of a country’s wellbeing has bolstered the role of happiness as an evolutionary yardstick of human wellbeing.

Since the first World Happiness Report in 2012, the United Nations has, until recently, come out with five happiness reports, with the most recent being the World Happiness Report 2017.

The report involves respondents in 155 countries, who answered a list of questions pertaining to their life satisfactions, averaged from 2014 to last year. It measures key determinants of happiness, which include gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, healthy years of life expectancy, social support, trust, perceived freedom and generosity.

Nonetheless, the focus of the latest happiness report is the social aspect, which has significant impact on the level of overall happiness in a community.

Among the surveyed nations, 41 are Muslim countries whose scores of happiness level vary significantly due to differences in socio-economic progress.

It is noteworthy that most Muslim countries that occupy the top 50 are the Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain.

Malaysia, Algeria and Turkmenistan have also been featured next to the Gulf nations.

Apparently, the top 10 happiest Muslim countries are oil producing nations, despite the recent decline of global crude oil prices that led to the slowdown in the oil and gas industry, and job losses, evincing that happiness depends on more than income.

It is interesting as well to note that there is a considerable gap between the highest scoring state (UAE at 6.648 score) with that of the second (Qatar at 6.357 score), which signifies a substantial disparity in terms of GDP, sustainable development and social welfare. This gap exists notwithstanding the fact that Qatar’s per capita income (US\$74,686.60) is higher than that of the UAE (US\$39, 313.30).

Another contributing factor may be that the UAE has already embarked on a happiness initiative via its “National Happiness and Positivity Charter”. It has also appointed a happiness minister in its

cabinet to nurture a happiness atmosphere throughout the country's public services and corporate sectors.

On the other side of the prism, it is striking that a large number of Muslim countries occupy the bottom two quarters of the index list, whereby the bottom 10 Muslim countries are Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Afghanistan, Yemen, Guinea, Togo and Syria. The report shows that countries in this segment are mostly African nations that are waiting to fulfill their expectations of development, despite 50 years of self-rule and self-proclaimed democracy.

The non-African countries that fall under this segment are mostly suffering from wars and political instabilities. Syria, for instance, is witnessing the deadliest civil war ever seen in recent decades.

The report is also illustrative of the happiness level changes that took place among Muslim countries in a one-year period. While the majority of these countries have recorded progressive improvements, some countries like Afghanistan (0.434 points), Egypt (0.373 points), Gabon (0.344 points), as well as Senegal (0.316 points), stand out. Brunei and Oman, unfortunately, are not included in the report, despite being among the more promising Muslim countries in terms of socio-economic development.

Arguably, the world happiness report might not be the best evaluative scheme that may provide for us an Islamic outlook of development. Its multidimensional approach, however, opens a new horizon for countries to gauge comprehensively their achievements in different life segments. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation should perhaps helm the initiative to develop its own benchmark that complies with the Islamic philosophical concept of happiness, something that is not foreign to Islamic intellectual heritage.

An Islamic index of happiness could perhaps provide a more culturally coherent gauge to help in the pursuit of producing yearly happiness reports for Muslim countries. Some attempts have been made but we have yet to see a full-fledged Islamic happiness index, to be made available for general use.

The UAE happiness initiatives should be seen as an exemplary benchmark for other Muslim countries to follow. With the emerging global trend of evaluating happiness at the national level, it is timely now for all Muslim countries to set their happiness agenda.

Appointing a minister of happiness might be an important step to begin with, but more importantly is the sustained emphasis on implementation of comprehensive policy measures to satisfy core happiness determinants as suggested by the UN happiness report.

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