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The Aga Khan after 50 years: The world's improving, and we may yet set it right

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CREDIT:
Aga Khan

TORONTO - Despite the West's "big, big, big failure" in Iraq and continuing conflict in much of Afghanistan, the Aga Khan says the world has made great strides against mass poverty, and he now sees real prospects for new bridges between Muslim states and the West.

Such optimism was recurrent during an hour-long exclusive interview with The Vancouver Sun on Sunday. The Aga Khan was here on the second stop of a four-city tour of Canada, which ends in Vancouver today, to celebrate his 50 years as hereditary leader of the world's 15 million Ismaili Muslims.

He cited several reasons for hope.

One is growing acceptance on both sides of the divide for his urgent call to combat what Harvard professor Samuel Huntington dubs "the clash of civilizations" and the Aga Khan terms "the clash of ignorance."

This is what led to the mess in Iraq, he said. It was "entirely predictable."

"Hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslim leaders would have told the Western world exactly what to expect when Saddam Hussein was eliminated."

And, "That's the sort of situation where predictability is absolutely essential."

Historically, he said, it has been common in the West to assume "the industrialized world is always right and therefore . . . should be the norm for everybody else."

The Muslim world doesn't always agree, but it is often torn, wanting to adopt what it sees as the best from the West while shunning the rest.

Education is the key to better relations, he said.

For Muslim states, this involves continuing his 50-year push for acceptance of pluralism and an end to insistence that tribal or ethnic priorities always trump the greater good. And it involves schooling - one of the key thrusts of his Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). This $500-million-a-year group of agencies works in a score of poor countries on projects that range from activity-filled little madrassas where preschoolers learn to read in rural villages and urban slums, to on-the-job teacher training in places where qualifications are rock-bottom low, to state-of-the-art high schools offering the international baccalaureate program, to two acclaimed international universities.

For the West, it means more inclusive curriculums in institutions that were long rooted solely in the Judeo-Christian tradition, unaware of Muslim history and culture. This is happening, he said, to the point where the West will come to redefine what it means to be an educated person in today's world.

So, too, with Western governments. They are gradually coming to understand just how diverse is the Muslim world, yet how in every Muslim country the relationship between religion and state is, unlike in the West, inextricably intertwined.

What's still needed, he said, is two things.

The Muslim world has to be clearer about what it wants. And the Western world must learn to assess the risks in doing what it does.

"The reactive mode is a tremendous liability. Being in an anticipatory mode changes the whole nature of things. . . .

"What's very encouraging, from my point of view, is that this identifying of risk is something I can [now] talk to Western governments about."

The Aga Khan stressed again and again the need for patience and taking the long-term view. But when asked about the urgent problem of Afghanistan - the need for Western nations to decide what to do next week and next month and next year - he concedes that in the violent areas security is an immediate concern.

"Development cannot take place in an environment of insecurity," so regional issues have to be taken care of, including in the neighbouring tribal areas of Pakistan, where there has never been central government control.

But, "I tend to think of Afghanistan as a number of countries . . . with different ethnic backgrounds, different levels of security and peace."

So it's important "not only to deal with security issues - and security is severe - but to continue to build strongly and confidently in areas where reconstruction is taking place."

"Once [reconstruction] becomes self-sustaining, it tends to grow across divides. People look at what's happening village to village or province to province, and they ask themselves, 'Can we get this?'"

This opens up the possibility of dialogue. And, once this process starts, "success will spill over."

In some once-destitute parts of the world - he mentioned Malaysia and Indonesia, but there are many more - progress is well under way.

So, despite the continuing strife and uncertain outcomes in Afghanistan, Iraq and several other parts of the world he cares about deeply, his optimism remains intact.

In fact, he said, over the half century since he inherited the Ismaili imamate from his grandfather, the gap between what he hopes for the world and what he actually expects has narrowed greatly.

That was the era of declining colonialism and frightening Cold War tensions

"The world I became involved in in 1957 was a very, very difficult world to work in. The forces at play were dramatic.

"That has all changed significantly."

Today's challenge, he said, has evolved into how to make the remaining poor

areas of the world "areas of opportunity where people can have hope and confidence in improving the quality of life."

That challenge fits perfectly with a central ethic of his faith.

Muslims, he said, do believe in concepts of charity - giving to needy people who have no other options.

But a higher concept - a duty, rather than a gift inspired by kindness - is to help build in the powerless "the capacity to be masters of their own destiny.

"That is referred to [in his faith] as the best form of charity."

From this ethic sprang what was, at the time, the odd mix of non-profit and profit-seeking agencies that make up the AKDN. It has led, for example, to substantial investments in things like Afghanistan's first five-star hotel - sure from the get-go to be a money-loser, but a potential profit centre nonetheless - or a plant to manufacture nets for a not-yet-established aquaculture industry in Uganda.

It is, in other words, remarkably patient capital. And while his agencies that make such investments hope to make money - and some, indeed, do - the decision to invest is never profit-driven. The business case is based first on whether it will foster improvements in quality of life.

Though the AKDN had few peers when it pioneered the use of business tools to attain social goals, the approach is catching on. As has the ethical imperative for at least some of those who have done well to also do good.

The Aga Khan said he is delighted at the resurgence of massive private capital in development initiatives manifest by people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet or, on a smaller but still dramatic scale, Vancouver mining magnates Frank Giustra and Lukas Lundin, who have pledged $100 million each to the Clinton Foundation.

"I am very, very, very pleased that there is a sense of social ethics which is coming back in a part of the world which I thought had become so materialistic that they had lost the notion of ethics. That they had lost notions of the unity of humanity and the fact that they couldn't leave people - millions and millions of people - at risk of ill health, of marginalization, lack of security. . . .

"At one time I thought things were really becoming just too materialistic. But Bill Gates and other people around him are starting to reverse that whole attitude."

A benefit that is perhaps related to this is Western donors' increasing adoption of another concept his agencies have long practised - businesslike oversight of development spending.

"For a long time, there was a notion that development work, development activity, should not be measured," he said. "It was [seen as] unethical to measure something which was done with a charitable attitude.

"But measuring the impact doesn't mean that it's a commercial goal. It's understanding the impact on the communities you want to help.

"If your programs of support are not doing what they should do, you need to know that. You need to be able to understand what's gone wrong, and you need to be able to correct it."

For programs delivering things such as education and health care, outcomes are usually countable and easy to understand. But in areas that are less tangible but equally important - such as fostering vibrant elements of civil

society that he considers so important to protecting nascent democracies and pre-empting conflict - measurement is not straightforward.

For this, donors must gauge the impact on quality of life - as defined by the aid recipients.

"One of the lessons we've learned is to . . . listen and listen and listen," he said. "If you apply your own criteria, you'll get it wrong."

Yet, even then, it's not quite so simple.

Both for the faith-based Aga Khan network and for principled democracies like Canada, donors can and often do face a delicate dilemma when their cherished beliefs are not shared by recipient societies. Equal treatment for women is one such value that is shared by the Aga Khan and the Canadian government but often flies in the face of tradition in the places that most need our help.

Drawing a line in the sand is one option when such values conflict, he said, but "you have to be very careful handling these things, because they can be a real boomerang if you get them wrong. . . .

"It's not the issue of whether you want to see them changed. It's the issue of how do you change them."

So his answer boils down to persistence and patience.

These themes of patience and persistence permeate the Aga Khan's responses on almost every issue. It has taken 25 years - half the span of his long-running imamate - to foster modest, though significant, economic development and functional cooperation among nearly 4,000 villages in lawless northern Pakistan. It will take similar patience, plus a lot of wisdom, to counter the fallout of failed democracies in areas as diverse as Central Asia, East Africa and Eastern Europe.

But, going forward, he sees a 25-year span as probably long enough to set right the worst of the dire poverty that afflicts a quarter of the world's people. If, and this is huge if, the world gets its policies and priorities right.

Getting it right would mean more global and regional stability, better quality of life for millions, and, eventually, a raft of new players buying and selling in the world marketplace.

And getting it wrong?

"The risk of failure is that these parts of the world will remain fragile, ill-governed, with weak economies. Internal stresses will become external stresses."

This risk, he warns, is dangerously high.

Thus, "The downside is very, very serious. And the upside is encouraging, and can even be achieved."

Then, as the interview ends, he adds one more risk: "Intellectual vanity. For everyone."

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