The One Vice Coronavirus Should Wipe Out

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At the beginning of the current worldwide uncertainty involving the novel coronavirus, I was watching a TED talk on the pandemic by a public health expert. She was analyzing various reasons for this outbreak and was offering professional advice on staying safe from the virus.

She emphasized over and again the importance of immediately putting a brake on smoking habits.

Public Health Sanctioned?

Governments around the globe have taken strict measures to stop the spread of this new disease. They are paying huge economic costs for the sake of getting rid of coronavirus.

In many countries, people have been observing social distancing guidelines and following their governments' stay-at-home directives.

In Malaysia, during this emergency period, we are allowed to leave our residences only for groceries and other necessities. Curbing smoking habits, unfortunately, still isn't a health focus, even with the pandemic.

The other afternoon, while driving in Kuala Lumpur to a grocery shop, I found the road almost empty. Law enforcers and military personnel blockaded roads, asking car drivers for credible reasons for their movement outside.

In such a precarious situation, when the entire city was wrapped up in an eerie calm, I saw men at the wheel smoking, their white smoke puffing into the air. They were arrogantly brandishing their burning cigars from motor vehicles with no visible sign of embarrassment.

Though the police were a stone's throw away, I didn't notice any fear of punishment from the smokers. As with many other countries, Malaysia doesn't prohibit smoking in the street, in car parks or on pavements.

Smoky Realities

In the midst of the perils of the coronavirus crisis that we are facing globally, it is important to know that smoking is one of the chief enemies of our respiratory system. Most COVID-19 patients experience respiratory illness which smoking aggravates.

Smoking does greater harm to those innocent people who happen to be around smokers, victims of passive smoking. Personally, I feel suffocated and suffer temporary breathing difficulty when someone smokes around me.

I feel worse when I enter an enclosed facility like washrooms if someone has just smoked there. Sometimes I have to rush from one public toilet to another, searching for a facility free of smoke.

We face smoking-related health hazards for no fault of our own. In the spectre of libertarian paternalism, soaked in the craze of money making, industrialists still continue manufacturing cigarettes and thereby causing public health problems.

Is it fair the interest of the vast majority of people, who responsibly and rightfully choose not to smoke, is regularly ignored? While we suffer silently, smokers freely pollute the air and the environment around us.

The multinational tobacco companies of rich and powerful countries are extorting money from poor and not-so-poor nations by selling cigars.

Sadly, governments are not doing enough to protect citizens' health from tobacco smoke and their economies from the exploitation of tobacco manufacturing industries. Children are especially vulnerable not only to SHS, but to addiction through marketing cigarettes aimed at them.

Who Takes Responsibility?

Given all the health and economic implications of the smoking addiction and considering the critical phase of the coronavirus pandemic that we

are facing now, it is important that all governments impose a comprehensive ban on smoking with immediate effect.

Such a bold action will eventually benefit the entire society in terms of economy, public health and morality.

Perhaps governments are reluctant to put a comprehensive ban on smoking because of the revenue from cigarette taxes.

I humbly urge them to consider the health and economic implications of smoking. Smoking aggravates not only coronavirus, it exacerbates many other medical conditions which negatively affect the lives of men, women and children the world over.

Smoking is an impediment to good parenting too. Like others, smoking parents also do not want their children to develop this wrong habit.

However, by lighting a cigarette in front of their children, a parent instantly loses all moral authority over them. I have seen many children of smoking parents start smoking from early teens and thus proliferate this particular social and health problem.

Leaving the matter to the conscience of such parents may not take us anywhere. Legal prohibition on smoking is in desperate need.

How Should Muslims Respond?

Our places of worship are also not safe from the scourge of smoking. I often see men – young and old – smoke cigarettes inside masjid compounds at will without any unease or anxiety over receiving admonition from the masjid authority.

Governments of Muslim-majority countries in general and masjid authorities in particular have added reasons to ban smoking. First, it is one of worst forms of wasting money, and wastage is haram in Islam.

Secondly, smoking leads to many incurable diseases and can be regarded as slow suicide, and suicide is one of the cardinal sins in Islam. Thirdly, according to Islam, our health is a trust from God. Humans have no right to harm their health. Fourthly, smoking is harmful to neighbor, and causing harms to neighbors is forbidden in Islam.

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