

Grenfell: A Damning Indictment of the Capitalist System

News:

On 4th September, the inquiry report into the Grenfell tragedy where 72 people died in a fire in a high-rise residential building in London was published. The high death toll was blamed primarily on the cladding and insulation material used on the walls of the building which proved to be highly flammable and led to the rapid spread of the fire across the tower block. It was a damning report that described decades of failure by successive British governments and bodies to ensure safe construction of residential tower blocks, as well as greed and profiteering of companies within the building industry who sought commercial success at the expense of people's lives. The inquiry chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick highlighted a litany of failures by governments, local council leaders and bodies, the fire service and producers of the material used to build and clad the block of flats. The report stated that the Grenfell fire was the result of "an unedifying merry-go-round of buck passing" and "systematic dishonesty and greed", and the "unscrupulous" manufacturing of dangerous building materials.

Comment:

The report described serious failures at every level of the system by those charged with the responsibility to take care of their citizens, with profit being prioritized over the welfare and safety of people. Decades of failure of British governments from 1991-2017 failed to address the problem of flammable cladding which was being used routinely in the construction of buildings. Deregulation of construction laws by the Cameron Conservative government to make it easier, and hence cheaper, for construction firms to build new housing also contributed to the tragedy. It was stated that the government deregulation drive saw crucial safety matters "ignored, delayed or disregarded" even though the government was "well aware of the risks".

The local council in which the Grenfell tower was located allowed firms to use the dangerous construction materials that enabled the fire to spread rapidly. The Tenant Management Organisation, the public body governing the tower block, sought to cut costs by allowing the dangerous cladding to be used, effectively making the building a death trap. And a number of building companies sold their products in a dishonest manner, marketing them as safe despite knowing otherwise. For example, the firm Arconic, which made the 55PE cladding panels "deliberately concealed" their safety risks. It had data that showed it reacted to fire "in a very dangerous way", while senior executives knew that the cladding could be highly flammable but did not withdraw them from the market; rather they exploited weak regulatory laws in place. The company Kingspan made the "false claim" that its K15 product could be used safely on high-rise buildings, despite knowing that previous tests on systems incorporating K15 were "disastrous". It was reported that there were "long-running internal discussions about what it could get away with". The Grenfell report stated that there was "systematic dishonesty" in the testing and marketing of materials used and a "deliberate and sustained strategies to manipulate the testing processes, misrepresent test data and mislead the market" to get unsafe products past safety measures.

Alongside all this, serious concerns of the tenants of the Grenfell building regarding safety issues were ignored by the authorities for years. Many attributed this negligence in responding to their concerns to that fact that most residents were from a lower economic social class and therefore they were given less consideration by those in authority.

All this is not simply an indictment on individual “unscrupulous” governments and governmental bodies, or individual “greedy and crooked” companies, but an indictment and statement upon the capitalist system under which they all operated which has created an ethos at every level of governance and society of prioritizing profit and economic benefit over the needs and wellbeing of the people or other ethical values and considerations. It is a system without conscience where morals and principles are discarded if there is money to be made. It should be on trial alongside those responsible for the Grenfell tragedy. Indeed, this tragedy is only one of a litany of examples that demonstrates the disastrous fallout of capitalism. We see for example, water companies in Britain dumping sewage into rivers and seas despite the serious health risks to the population. We see companies in various countries spilling polluting wastes into rivers from their factories or into the air, causing serious health problems for local residents. We see the many factory fires and building collapses in countries such as Bangladesh or Nigeria due to companies cutting costs and disregarding safety considerations in constructing buildings or running businesses in their drive for profit while governments turn a blind eye or even provide them support and cover to engage in corrupt practices. And we saw how the high death toll in the earthquake that hit Turkey last year where thousands died in collapsed buildings was attributed to corrupt cost-cutting building practices aimed at maximizing profit and revenue, in which both companies and the government was implicated.

It is clear that the capitalist system is defunct and not fit for purpose in governing people’s lives. It is a system that nurtures mindsets, creates an environment, passes laws and policies and encourages decisions where securing financial gain is paramount, while looking after the people is an afterthought, and often ignored in the interests of big business or the wealthy. As Muslims, this should be a reminder that any man-made system will fail to look after humanity effectively. It is the Islamic political system, as ordained by the Creator of the Universe, Allah (swt), which embodies all the laws and principles to genuinely and sincerely take care of the needs of people, and never places profit over their wellbeing. It is by replacing the corrupt and incompetent capitalist and other man-made systems that currently operate in our Muslim lands with the sublime Islamic system through establishing the Khilafah based upon the method of the Prophethood, that alone holds the promise of a leadership based upon guardianship, and a prosperous, ethical, just and safe future for the region, and that will stand as a model to the nations of the world of how humanity should be governed.

﴿إِنَّمَا كَانَ قَوْلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذَا دُعُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَنْ يَقُولُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ﴾

“The only statement of the (true) believers when they are called to Allah and His Messenger to judge between them is that they say, “We hear and we obey.” And those are the successful.” [An-Nur: 51]

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