

A MOVEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

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Abstract

Today, one of the most important criteria indicating the position of a country on the index of development is the existence and impact of non-governmental organizations. Various associations and foundations established within the framework of the Movement of Volunteers, lead by Fethullah Gülen since 1960s in Turkey can be defined as NGOs. The volunteers involved in this movement conduct activities geared toward promoting dialogue that bring all social sections closer together, with a particular emphasis on education; today such activities are extensively organized in various parts of the world. To this end, educational institutions have been established world-wide, offering new opportunities for different nations, with no political motives whatsoever being involved. This movement rejects the idea of the clash of civilizations, and aims to live in a peaceful world; departing from the principle of simply accepting everyone as they are, national and international meetings have been organized to discuss the issues and problems that present, or likely to present obstacles to an atmosphere of peaceful cohabitation and coexistence from developing. Everybody who takes part in this voluntary movement, from every walk of life, has made enormous self-sacrifices. In a world that is becoming increasingly global, these activities act as models of coexistence and cohabitation for all people, irrespective of individual race, language, religion, color, character or nationality with the help of education and dialogue, and it is hoped that these activities will accelerate and become more widespread.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the 20th century, humanity hoped that its scientific and technological achievements would eventually eliminate material and spiritual problems. However, with the increase in the number of wars, famine, natural disasters, poverty and other problems, humankind has become utterly desperate. The fact that famine cannot be prevented even though cereal production has increased, and that unfair distribution and social and political imbalances cannot be eliminated despite numerous legal measures, suggest that the solution should be sought not in the system, but in education.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the death toll from wars, famine, and massacres, i.e. in only five years, has exceeded one hundred and fifty million. Humanity entered this long-awaited new century facing problems that caused social disintegration and violence to increase, strategic balances to change, world disorder to intensify, and a great variety of exploitation to become systematic.

The new world order is seen as the victory of technological civilization. Yet, this victory has planted seeds of dissatisfaction. The absolute supremacy of technology, its domination of humanity, and the occasional threats it offers to human existence have disrupted the harmony that humanity finds within itself and the environment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Despite all the existing systems, humanity has not yet been able to find the peace it has sought. The fact the crime-level is high, even among educated people, suggests that existing educational policies should be reviewed. The need for a new educational philosophy which gives weight to both reason and spirit in science has been emphasized by many scholars. The most important issue of the contemporary education system is how to ensure that science comprehends life as a whole and serves the basic values of humanity with an emphasis on the natural balance. Now that all problems can be routed back to “man” himself, the main point is to know man and educate him in the best manner possible. An important aim of education is to ensure that individual abilities are developed and potential traits are transformed into profitable behavior. In this process, the basic purpose should be to develop the individual personality, to make each person amenable to teamwork, to adopt the culture of coexistence, a sense of responsibility, and ethical values,

and to make these principles the center of human life. Knowledge without real life is, in a sense, useless. Therefore, education should endow individuals with behavioral education that will ensure their easy integration into society and enable them to live in peace with the world.

A MOVEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

Departing from these considerations, a new and original volunteer movement was inspired and initiated by Fethullah Gülen, a man who has educated himself extensively in various fields and who is well aware of contemporary problems; the movement was begun in 1968 in Turkey. The basic principle of this movement is to emphasize dialogue with all and accept all as they are. The basic purpose is to ensure respect for objective and universal human values, to never have ulterior motives to seek material interests nor to impose any ideology or to seize power through politics in any country. Since the inception of this movement, nearly 40 years, no act that has been contrary to these principles has been performed anywhere in the world. The authorities in respective countries are well aware of this fact, and accordingly support this movement.

This movement is completely non-governmental, like NGOs; people from various age groups and different races establish foundations and associations that have a particular emphasis on education. Such activities, which first were carried out in the form of dormitories and then later concentrating on schools, expanded at first throughout Turkey, and then onto Central Asia, from where the movement went on to become world-wide.

Significant success was attained in these activities at both national and international levels. People from every walk of life, including the businessmen who had contributed financially to the establishment of these institutions and the teachers who took an active part in this venture, made significant self-sacrifices. Those who attended these educational institutions performed extremely well at both local and international scientific contests and Olympiads. Those who resided in the dormitories were raised as young people who had respect for their families, their nation, and humanity; they were able to avoid such bad habits as drugs, alcohol, smoking, etc. As the young people who were educated at these institutions started to work at the same institutions as their teachers and administrators, the process accelerated.

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

Following the breakdown of the Soviet Union and upon inspiration from Fethullah Gülen, businessmen and teachers lost no time in going to the newly emerging republics in the same sense of responsibility without losing any time. The educational institutions established in these countries have accomplished unparalleled achievements, which allowed them to win the confidence of high-ranking officials in these countries. These institutions continued their services as multicultural, multilingual, and secular educational institutions. The medium of education was English, Turkish, Russian, and the national language of the respective country. No religious or nationalistic propaganda was or is allowed.

Ten years have passed since the establishment of these institutions. The children of the high-ranking officials of the respective countries have attended these institutions. They have even graduated from university and now these young people are working for their native lands, and for all of humanity, with love, respect, tolerance, and the quality to accept all people as they are. Thus, in other countries, as well, where these institutions have been established (in Europe, Africa, the Pacific and in other areas), a generation of young people who have become integrated with the world, who live in peace and tolerance toward each other, has emerged. They have already started to make efforts to make the world a peaceful place for future generations and their efforts will surely bear wonderful fruit in the near future.

Thanks to the educational institutions that have been founded by this movement of volunteers in European countries, that the younger generation, in particular that of Turkish background, have been saved from alienation to their own culture and history, becoming well-adjusted people who will be a benefit to the future of Europe. They attend universities, realizing that serious work is expected of them, without running the risk of falling into all kinds of indulgence including drug abuse. These educational institutions have helped young people to complete their undergraduate and postgraduate studies and to participate in active integration in the society where they live. Having seen these young people also called as the third generation, the high-ranking figures of our country and of these countries can now look to the future with hope and pride.

PHILOSOPHY

In a world full of hatred, violence and evil, this movement of volunteers, which focuses on human love, will play a significant role in the creation of an atmosphere of peace and tolerance that will spread throughout the world in the future. The educators, who are working in the institutions established by the movement, see each student as a separate world and consider one-to-one interaction with individuals to be the basic tool of education; they allocate most of their time to their students.

These educational activities are continually improved by taking into consideration new challenges, technological innovations, and cultural particularities. One cannot help wishing that everybody could contribute to this movement and that this movement could advance and blossom in full. No national, racial, religious, linguistic, or cultural difference matters, and indeed this system runs smoothly by itself.

In addition to these education activities, there are also attempts at establishing dialogue at every level, with a view to ensuring that people in Turkey and in the world become acquainted with each other, leading to a better understanding.

DIALOGUE

The Journalists and Writers Foundation, with Fethullah Gülen as honorary chairman, organizes meetings called *Abant Platform* where different opinions and ideas on important issues concerning the societies are discussed in a suitable manner, and the collective ideas that emerge from these meetings can be shared with the wider society. This platform has acquired an international identity with participants and followers from all over the world, particularly from the US, Europe, and Russia. Also, the Intercultural Platform, which is affiliated to the Foundation, ensures the exchange of ideas between different cultures. In this framework, the Foundation conducts activities with journalists, writers and artists, irrespective of their world views or ideologies.

As also initiated by Fethullah Gülen through this Foundation, the organization of meetings with various religious and national leaders of Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Assyrian communities of Turkey has helped to eliminate some long-lasting tensions between various sections of society. In this respect, Gülen's visit to late Pope John Paul II

and their agreement on the possibility of undertaking certain joint projects had significant implications. Gülen has also met with political leaders of Turkey, in his own words, "as a simple citizen," and these meetings have been both very useful and provided examples of conduct for other citizens.

FINANCE

This movement is carried out by individual contributions from volunteers and without any affiliation or support, tangible or intangible, with any local or foreign government body or any other organization, and it operates within the framework set forth above.

Concerning the financing of the movement, it is secured for the most part by complimentary contributions from businessmen who have chosen to support this movement and by the tuition paid by students. The fact that the movement has no source of finance other than these, in any form, is a well-known fact, and government officials of the respective countries are aware of this.

As for the management of affairs, every institution that is established is a corporate body that is independent of the others and is managed by those people who are taking part in the volunteer movement. There is no organic relationship among educational institutions or the other institutions, both within and without the country. The only connection among these institutions is the exchange of positive and beautiful ideas and thoughts that arise from a commitment to the same feelings.

FETHULLAH GÜLEN

The role of Fethullah Gülen in this movement is that Gülen initially provided suggestions for the initiation of such a movement, thus providing the stimulus. His inspiration still continues. His ideas on the basic principles and his suggestions for this movement are available to all in the form of more than twenty books, some of which consist of several volumes, audio cassettes, video cassettes, CDs, and on the Internet, most of which have been translated into many languages. At the same time, he gave lectures for more than 30 years on these and other social issues, in the form of sermons in the mosques, and he also presented his ideas on important subjects in a clear and understandable manner in many national or international conferences. Currently, he continues to disclose his views on

various issues in various languages on some websites, particularly on www.fethullahgulen.org. He always stresses that any dispute, great or small, could and should be settled through reconciliation, that war and killing should be eliminated, and that everybody should strive to live together in a peaceful world.

AIM

The ultimate aim of this movement is in no way to seize economic, political, or cultural power by establishing or participating in a political party inside or outside the country; rather, it is to serve humankind with self-sacrifice, without expecting anything in return for the service. Indeed, in response to questions asked to Fethullah Gülen about the political party he allegedly was supporting before the 3 November 2002 elections, he said the following in the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*:

"As in the past, I am currently maintaining the same distance to all political parties. Even if power, not only in Turkey, but that of the entire world, were to be presented to me as a gift, I have been long determined to reject it with contempt."

EMPLOYEES

The members of this movement of volunteers do not merely follow educational affairs and work at these institutions. They also have jobs and positions outside these institutions (as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, civil servants, laborers, etc.). They support these educational activities, financially, physically, and spiritually as well as carrying out their normal jobs.

A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

There are numerous non-governmental organizations that work similarly for various purposes all around the world (i.e., anti-smoking associations, several medical foundations, women's rights associations, environmental organizations, etc.). Everybody admires and appreciates such organizations and supports them if they are financially capable of doing so. In the same manner, this movement of volunteers aims to provide service for humanity as one of the many non-governmental organizations that promote universal humanistic

values, such as respect for human dignity, human rights, the rule of law, preservation of environment, democracy, etc.

Volunteers of the movement do not expect to reap any benefit from anyone in return for their sacrifices. Even long-serving members have no seniority to newcomers. There is no ranking in the movement (the members of the movement expect to be given their rewards by God in the Hereafter). Their primary motivation during their service in this movement is the inner contentment and the blessings of God they expect to attain in it. Thus, the works progress in a continuous loop.

SHARING AND SELF-SACRIFICE

The model provided by the modern education institutions that have been established by Turkish entrepreneurs, both at home and abroad, has led to the sharing of the educational philosophy that acts as an elixir for success in these institutions with the rest of the world.

The material structure built with self-sacrifice by businessmen, artisans, teachers, civil servants, and workers is filled with altruism and self-sacrifice from managers, teachers, students, and their parents. Here are the true motives that lie behind the success of these institutions: spiritual and ethical gain, altruism, self-sacrifice and love...

The bridges established by the Turkish educational institutions have helped Turkish businessmen, s scientists, tourists and students to become open to the rest of the world. Thus, relations between countries have been reinforced, and societies can become acquainted with one another. The societies that know each other can develop a culture of living in harmony, peace, and tolerance.

These institutions have a corporate identity and their management is in the hands of real people. However, having been appointed as a manger though a social contract, these people are not allowed to utilize the institutions for their own benefits. Those who are now unable to work actively in the movement give over their role to the young people who will carry the torch of the altruistic services of the movement.

CONCLUSION

A person who lives in a peaceful and happy world is an instrument against terrorism, conflict and threats. "Shared cultural premises" that have been created with friendship and tolerance by people with different languages, religions, races and cultures, are a guarantee for the future of the world.