

Islam, West and Muslims

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Assault in Riyadh and Casablanca by suicide squads in 2003, has generated an atmosphere of terror in West Asia and North Africa. It is highly injurious for the political well being of the World of Islam as it may accelerate the growing influence of American imperialism in the Third World under the pretext of war against terrorism. After successful neo-imperial actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American policy makers may speed up efforts to change the geography of the entire region.

There is no doubt that violence of all variety, irrespective of who is the perpetrator and who is the victim, deserves severest condemnation. There should be no discrimination, partiality or soft-peddaling, because it weakens our claims to peaceful and moral character of Islam and also makes them an object of ridicule in the eyes of the world.

If the present predicament of Islam, the crisis of its religious and political status and the reasons behind it are analysed, it will be found that Muslims themselves are responsible for it. Most of the Muslim majority states are still wallowing in the medieval political and social system in which the sovereignty is vested in the autocratic ruler whose word is law and whose opinion reigns supreme in all matters political economic and social. The situation is worsened by the religious leaders who attribute to the ruler the status of being a reflection of God on earth. People have been fragmented into groups based on tribal loyalties and antediluvian prejudices are fanned to keep them divided. People in these countries generally have no voice or share in the governance, development plans and shaping of their future.

This situation obtains at a time when the sovereignty of the people is the accepted basis of polity, the world over. It is no coincidence but a manifest reality that the superiority that the developed countries enjoy today is mainly due to the system wherein people play a decisive role and where transparency is the norm. The most tragic aspect of all this is that these people and the religion of Islam have lost those lofty values of human dignity and freedom that they had benefited of receiving in the seventh century through the divine message spread by Prophet Mohammad which was exemplified by the four Righteous Caliphs of Islam.

The new generation in the Islamic world is facing a serious confusion of thought and action. They have, on the one hand, developed solvenliness and inertia because of the oil wealth that has furnished them all material resources and comforts without any effort. On the other hand, the exposure to western education and ideas has driven them deep into frustration and despair about the system which they are forced to live with. With this state of mind when they recall the revolution of human welfare wrought by their religion in the earlier era, they develop a deep

hatred for their rulers' obsequious attitude towards the West which indirectly helps the oppressive rulers to perpetuate their rule, in clear disregard of the norms of democracy and freedom. When they find that all modern ideologies are failing to meet the challenges of the times they feel there is no way except returning to the past.

Most of the rulers in the Islamic countries who are either monarchs or autocrats to maintain their power rely more on American than on their own people. America in turn exacts the price for that support and directs their policies in its own national interests. America is condemned for acting in its own selfish interest but then it should not be overlooked that individuals, societies and states act only to serve their own interests. The real culprits are the rulers who sacrifice the interests of their people and their nations for their personal or dynastic good. Fault lies not with the tiger but with those who chose to ride it in order to overawe their own people; it is another matter that they are themselves so frightened that they dare not dismount the tiger.

For most of the last half century, the most affluent among the Muslim countries have had no well-considered foreign policy. First they served as cat's paw in the imperialist strategy against the then Soviet Union. Later they were so frightened of Iran's Islamic revolution that they deployed most of their resources in 'the mother of all wars' under the leadership of Saddam Hussain. And after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan the armed contingents they had themselves promoted and prepared were brought down from the position of 'mujahideen' (holy warriors) and made out to be 'terrorists'. And for the misdeeds of these terrorists not these terrorist alone but the entire people of Afghanistan were punished. The events of Iraq need no further comments.

Economy tells the same story. Almost all the wealth of the West Asia was deposited in American-and other European banks and the same countries were preferred for investment too. That added to the prosperity of the developed countries whereas those who made the deposits and investments live under perpetual fear of their assets being frozen under one or the other pretext. If that capital had been utilised to build the financial and economic institutions in the region and proper investments made in the third world countries, most of the countries of Asia and Africa would have been free of poverty and destitution and joined the ranks of the developed world. In that case most of these countries and their people would have been strong supporters of these Muslim countries and would have proved reliable allies in times of the crisis.

Currently the policies adopted by the U.S.A. and its western allies are disapproved as aggressive and discriminatory by most people and the world over. If the denizens of the White House and Downing Street ever care to objectively look at these policies they would not find the entire world unjustified. There are many searching questions. For example, why the swiftness shown in building an alliance to punish Saddam Hussain for his foolish usurpation of Kuwaiti territory, has been lacking in the case of the oppressive aggression of Israel? Another question: if the violence of the Al-Qaida is Islamic terrorism why the violence of 'Irish Republican Army' is not termed as Christian terrorism? If this is unjustified why should Islam be held guilty for the reprehensible activities of a few misguided people, especially when it is universally known that they are the creation of America and some of its allies themselves?

Are American and its western collaborators less responsible for the neglect of democratic secular and modern values in the world of Islam? Haven't those who are exhorting the rest of the world for democracy not consciously adopted policies to ensure continuation of autocratic tyranny in Muslim countries just to buttress democracy at home? Autocrats and tyrants are the pets of their foreign policy but the democratic elements in these countries are never cared for. How ironical it is that countries like Iran and Malaysia that pursue democratic policies are treated as enemies! Similarly, the American camp has never cared to appreciate the aspirations of the Palestinians who have the highest literacy rate in that region and who have been by nature secular and democratic, and where till recently, religious extremism was virtually unknown. Has their just struggle been supported and any honest effort made to restore their just rights? On the contrary, a campaign of character assassination is afoot to make Yasser Arafat ineffective among his people when he has discarded the gun and picked up the olive branch. Efforts are made to kill him and demands made to exile him. Consequently, the extremist Palestinian groups like Hizbullah and Hamas are gaining prominence in the Palestinian struggle.

In this context the events in Algeria are also noticeable. When a movement was launched against military autocracy in the name of religion the ruling junta came down heavily upon it and a number of people were killed. When it was decided to ascertain the wishes of people through electoral process and the people expressed their preference for the Islamists, the rulers rode rough shod over the people's verdict and strengthened their iron grip. What is regrettable and surprising is that the western democracies approved of the usurpation. It was forgotten that when the opinion of people is not respected and the option of ballot is denied the exploited and the neglected are forced to resort to bullet. The aim of this analysis is to understand the reason behind the present state of affairs and to pinpoint the forces responsible for it. Helpless and frustration cannot be the response of the people who have been fortified with the divine message La-Taqnatu (Despair not) Nor certainly is violence the proper response; it only provides strength and justification to the opponents while the Islamists lose popular support and sympathy. The key to success is the lesson given in the holy Quran, that is, to stick to faith, right conduct and exercise patience and perseverance. To follow the footsteps of the Prophet is the only way to establish the rule of true faith.

Today as the world is being squeezed into a global village, it can be won by the guiding principle of peaceful coexistence enshrined in the 'Covenant of Madina'. The Prophet's last address 'Khutba Hujjat-a-Widaa', the virtual manifesto of universal brotherhood and human equality, can defeat the pernicious theory of 'Conflict of Civilizations' propounded by arrogant theorists of the West. Let us not forget that we are living not in the age of Contentious Debate but of Peaceful Dialogue. The world of Islam has to prepare itself for coming out of the rarefied atmosphere of sentimentality and stand on the solid ground of reality; they should fortify their societies by introducing respect for life, care of human rights, support to democratic values and clean conduct, all these constitute the essence of Islam.

Muslims have to be careful at least not to have more enemies if more friends are not won. For instance, characterising the aggressive attitude of the American and British governments, as "Crusades" would only strengthen the Bush-Blair policy. They must keep in view the support they are getting from justice-loving and humanist Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and followers of other faiths everywhere from the film city of Hollywood, the academic world of

Oxford and Cambridge to the markets of New York, Paris, Tokyo and Seoul and in the political fora of Washington, London, Moscow and Madrid. Let us not forget that if Bush and Blair were the 'Crusade heroes' hundreds of Protestant priests including the Arch Bishop of Canterbury and the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Paul, would not have openly condemned them.

The current conflict is not a Crusade but a war of neo—imperialism against humanity. Its victims have to formulate their strategy together with all those who love justice and equality irrespective of race, religion and language. This is the age of Gandhi and Mandela not of Bush and Blair. It would therefore, be wrong to rely solely on the ruling establishments. Correct strategy would have to be built on the basis of the civil society by establishing close and living contact at all levels.