

Islam as Refuge from Failure

HIS picture in the New York Times, August 29, shows Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif surrounded by admiring political colleagues of the religious right. Shaking hands with a bearded Maulana he too appears pleased and triumphant. Neither the admiration nor the feeling of triumph is likely to last. In our time, dragging Islam into politics invariably produces internal dissension and civil strife, risks to which Pakistan is more vulnerable than most countries.

The occasion for the celebratory scene is the proposed amendment to the Constitution. It is likely to push Pakistan toward the totalitarianism and the darkness of a narrowly imagined past. Whatever happens to Mr. Sharif, his yes men and cheerleaders, the country and its people may not return from it in a single piece. Throughout Muslim history the infusion of religion into politics has been a mark of weakness and decline. For his many Islamic measures and his war on Sikh and Hindu chiefs, Aurangzeb (1618-1707) has been a revered figure in the Islamist circles of South Asia. In addition to ignoring his excesses, his killing of brothers and imprisonment of father, they disregard a central fact of Aurangzeb's long reign: he inherited a strong state and left behind a tottering one. This enormous failure was attributable largely to his theocratic disposition.

The admiration for Aurangzeb is a symptom of a deep ailment. It suggests a widespread psychological disposition to throw religion into politics as a reinforcement mechanism. Hence, in Pakistan Islam has been a refuge of troubled and weak leaders. As the country has suffered - increasingly over five decades - from a crisis of leadership, the promise of an "Islamic state" has recurred as the core symbol of failure.

Mohammed Ali Jinnah was perhaps the only secure leader in Pakistan. However much his former detractors and new-found followers attempt to distort his views on the issue, Jinnah was a modern Muslim, with a secular outlook, contemporary life-style, and a modernist view of Islam's relationship to power and politics. He believed those Islamic values of justice, equality, and tolerance ought to shape power and politics without the formalistic imposition of structures and strictures of centuries past. His August 11, 1947, speech to the Constituent Assembly should be seen for what it was - his last testament to his vision for Pakistan. We are witnessing yet again the betrayal of this notion of statehood, and to avoid becoming accomplices, we must say No to Mr. Sharif's amendment forcefully and collectively.

Jinnah's successors were less sure of their political roots in the new state. They were also competing with each other. Yet they were saddled with the task of defining the constitutional dispensation of this diverse and divided nation state that lacked most attributes of nationhood. The Objectives Resolution was a product of their ambivalence, an attempt to apply the cement of Islam to secular purposes. To them 'amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi anil munkar' was a call to good government, not a prescription for re-inventing the past.

Thus, they deployed the Resolution to legitimize governance under the 1935 Act, and eventually to produce the 1956 Constitution of which the only 'Islamic' provisions were that the head of state shall be a Muslim and the parliament shall enact no laws repugnant to the Quran and Sunnah. Their constitutional acrobatics disregarded the fact that given the uneven

development of Muslim society and the revelling in past glories which is so common to people in enfeebled civilizations this Objectives Resolution and Islam itself shall be subject to distortions and misuse. The riots of 1953 were an early warning sadly ignored. Their formal commitment to "'amr bil ma'ruf" did nothing to discourage their squabbling and other indulgences in "munkar". The drafters and votaries of the Objectives Resolution set the stage for Pakistan's first military take-over.

Ayub Khan's coup d'etat was a welcome change from the misgovernance of Pakistan's Islam pedalling opportunists. Feeling politically secure and confident of his ability to govern, Ayub adopted what has been to date the most enlightened posture on the relationship between Islam and politics. He enacted fairly progressive family and marriage laws, and removed the adjectival 'Islamic' from the Republic of Pakistan, thus honouring Islam by delinking it from venality, opportunism, and mismanagement - features which have characterized government and politics in Pakistan.

In his early years in power Ayub Khan had, nevertheless, cared enough about the 'reconstruction of religious thought in Islam' to have invited back to Pakistan Dr. Fazlur Rahman, by far the finest Pakistani scholar of Islam, to lead an Institute for Islamic Studies. The 1965 war marked the decline of Ayub Khan's power. Hence, the end of his enlightened outlook on the relationship between religion and power. Already before Ayub's government had fallen the religious parties had hounded Dr. Fazlur Rahman into exile. As trouble mounted and desperation set in Ayub Khan too made feeble attempts to deploy religion as a political weapon.

Islam rarely figured in Z.A. Bhutto's anti-Ayub campaign. His focus was on betrayal - in Tashkent, of national security, our valiant armed forces - on imperialism and America, and on poverty as in the slogan roti, kapra aur makan. He was a master rhetorician. At the height of his power he silenced his critics with that memorable line "mein sharab peeta huun, awam ka khun to naheen peeta" (I drink wine, not the blood of the masses.) His career presents nevertheless a textbook case of Islam-as-a-refuge-of-the-weak-and-scoundrel regime. His first bow to 'Islamism' - declaring Ahmedis a non-Muslim minority - occurred after he had dismissed the government of Balochistan, that of the NWFP had resigned in protest, opposition leaders were imprisoned, and an insurgency was ignited. His last bow to Islamism was made as he struggled to hold on to power in the summer of 1977. Z.A. Bhutto had promised then, much like Mr. Nawaz Sharif today, to introduce the Shari'a and turn Pakistan into an Islamic state on the model of Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed Ziaul Haq, Bhutto's protege and executioner, gave the country his 'solemn promise' to hold elections in 90 days as the Constitution required. The self-styled "soldier of Islam" lied then and repeatedly thereafter, and never ceased to invoke Islam. He was an isolated dictator aided by right-wing 'Islamic' parties. So he proceeded on a programme of "Islamization" and Jihad in Afghanistan. We are still reaping his bitter harvest.

And now, with tragic familiarity and despite the hair-raising models of Islamism in Sudan and Afghanistan before him, Mr. Nawaz Sharif is proposing to further divide, embitter and, possibly, destroy this unfortunate country. Unlike Ziaul Haq he is an elected prime minister, not an isolated dictator, and unlike Z.A. Bhutto he is not facing a do-or-die challenge to his power. On the contrary, he commands an overwhelming majority in parliament while his

brother safely rules Punjab. Then why has he so panicked as to put in jeopardy both the faith and the country?

The answer lies perhaps in a sense of failure, and the fear one feels when things appear out of control. Mr. Nawaz Sharif was elected with a large parliamentary majority, which he interpreted as an unprecedented mandate. He inaugurated his prime ministerial term with a stirring address to the country, full of all the right promises, this amendment not being one of them. He has not fulfilled one, even one-half, of those pledges, and is unlikely to do so. Rather, in every respect the reverse of what he had promised has happened, and the people are suffering from a rising excess of want. So now Prime Minister Sharif wishes to compensate by giving them the gift of God, the Shari'a, five enforced prayers a day, and a fully empowered Amirul Momineen. He must be feeling very feeble indeed.

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