

COMMENTARY

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Which Way will Pakistan Tilt?

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The publication of satirical cartoons relating to the Prophet Muhammad by a French magazine (*Charles Hebdo*) adds to the anger and widespread protests already simmering across many countries and societies that espouse the Islamic faith. From North Africa to the Middle East and through South and Southeast Asia and some parts of Europe, the number of countries that have reported protests has crossed 20 and more than 30 people have died in the violence that followed. The tragic fatalities include the US Ambassador to Libya—J Christopher Stevens—whose brutal killing in Benghazi last week marked the beginning of the current spiral of death and destruction.

Specific to South Asia, Pakistan has witnessed the most intense street protests and local right-wing groups have compelled the government to declare 21 September as 'Love the Prophet Day' (*Youme-Ishq-e-Rasool*) and a national holiday. Similar protests and agitations on a smaller scale have taken place in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, though these have been relatively less violent.

The entry of the French cartoons into the already roiled anti-Islam waters is only likely to add to the prevailing turbulence and provide more fodder to those constituencies that seek to sow discord and bitterness between those of the Islamic faith and the "other" - currently symbolized by the US-led "West".

However, at a deeper level, the current tussle is also between the larger global liberal order, which significantly includes millions of Muslims who espouse a commendable degree of inter-religious tolerance and respect for diversity, dissent, law and the tenets of modernity. The tension and contestation between the liberal and tolerant interpretation of the practice of Islam on one hand, and the more inflexible and insular variant, goes back to the early decades after the demise

of Prophet Muhammad and has waxed and waned with the political fortunes of the respective adherents. In the South Asian context, the contrast between Mughal Emperor Akbar and his grandson Aurangzeb is illustrative.

These are issues that are periodically re-visited in the internal discourses of Islamic society and the current turbulence triggered by the obnoxious video clip relating to the early life of Prophet Muhammad and the more recent French satirical cartoons have reopened the debate.

Beginning with Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) and the controversy over the cartoons in a Danish newspaper (2005), the balance between the freedom of speech and respect for the sensitivities of a given constituency—in this case Muslim—have been differently tested. The enormity of 11 September attacks and its bloody aftermath has added to the complexity of the debate.

Pakistan, which, over the decades, consciously encouraged an exclusive Sunni-oriented, Wahhabi-Salafist preference in its domestic polity is now reviewing its short-sighted political-military choices with great dismay—and tentative objectivity. The recent display of candour is encouraging and specific attention may be drawn to the case of Rishma Masih, a young Christian girl afflicted with Down's syndrome who was wrongly charged with blasphemy. Over a tense fortnight, the manner in which the Pakistani state and civil society stood by her is the proverbial silver lining to a dark cloud that hovers menacingly.

In this connection, a seminar organized by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in Islamabad this week on *The Emerging Challenges and the Responsibilities of Islamic Scholars* is opportune. With participation from major Muslim nations, the seminar sought to promote peace and harmony through such interaction between international Islamic scholars and their Pakistani counterparts, so as to enable resolution of the various issues and challenges confronting the contemporary Muslim world.

Speakers asserted that it was imperative that Muslims stop finding fault in others for their own failures and focus on internal soul-searching to redress emerging issues. It was reiterated that the commonalities among the majority of humanity must be highlighted instead of focusing only on differences - and Islamic religious scholars were exhorted to promote peace and tolerance in society. The unstated sub-text is not to spread poison through distorting religion and extolling 'jihad'.

Such normative articulation is very reassuring in the current ambience of misplaced 'Islam versus the rest' bitterness and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Peshawar, Qibla Ayaz, offered some useful cues about the "way ahead". Noting that it was unfortunate that in the Muslim world the right kind of education was not receiving the priority it deserved, he added that, in the long run, religious extremism was bound to fail. Therefore, he said, it was the responsibility of civil society, informed members of the intelligentsia and religious scholars to

come forward and educate people about celebrating differences and maintaining societal unity despite this diversity. Can this well-meaning rhetoric translate into policy?

It is often averred that the liberal spectrum in Pakistan is confined to a small minority that is shrinking. From the assassination of governor Salman Taseer two years ago and the intimidation that followed, to the silver lining in the recent Rishma case—it is evident that some very deep churning is going on in Pakistan's internal discourses. The political establishment in Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world have a choice—of either playing to the gallery and stoking anti-US/anti-west fervour or encouraging much deeper introspection and restraint in the face of unseemly and distasteful provocation.

Self-regulation is a desirable virtue by all the interlocutors in the current turbulence, but it has to come from within. In the interim, dissent through debate, peaceful protests and recourse to law is the preferred option. Mindless mayhem, however spontaneous and anguished, must be eschewed. Friday will give a sense of which way Pakistan is tilting.

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