

Islam and power



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

GEORGE W. Bush is not a man for second thoughts, but even he might have had some second thoughts. Ever since 9/11, Bush has made the promotion of democracy in the Middle East the centerpiece of his foreign policy, and doggedly pushed the issue. Over the last few months, however, this approach has borne strange fruit, culminating in Hamas' victory in Gaza and the West Bank.

Before that, we have watched it strengthen Hizbullah in Lebanon, which (like Hamas) is often described in the West as a terrorist organization. In Iraq, the policy has brought into office conservative religious parties with their own private militias. In Egypt, it has bolstered the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the oldest fundamentalist organizations in the Arab world, from which al Qaeda descends. Democracies replace resentment with hope, respect the rights of their citizens and their neighbors, and join the fight against terror," Bush said last week in his State of the Union address. But is this true of the people coming to power in the Arab world today?

This is an issue that deserves serious thought, well beyond pointing to the awkwardness of Bush's position. Bush's prescription is, after all, one accepted by many governments: it is also European policy to push for democratic reform in the Middle East. And in fact, little has happened over the last few months that makes the case for continued support of Muslim dictatorships. But recent events do powerfully suggest that if we don't better understand the history, culture and politics of the countries that we are "reforming," we will be in for an extremely rocky ride.

There is a tension in the Islamic world between the desire for democracy and a respect for liberty. (It is a tension that once raged in the West and still exists in pockets today.) This is most apparent in the ongoing fury over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a small Danish newspaper. The cartoons were offensive and needlessly provocative. Had the paper published racist caricatures of other peoples or

religions, it would also have been roundly condemned and perhaps boycotted. But the cartoonist and editors would not have feared for their lives. It is the violence of the response in some parts of the Muslim world that suggests a rejection of the ideas of tolerance and freedom of expression that are at the heart of modern Western societies.

Why are all these strains rising now? Islamic fundamentalism was supposed to be on the wane. Five years ago the best scholars of the phenomenon were writing books with titles like "The Failure of Political Islam." Observers pointed to the exhaustion of the Iranian revolution, the ebbing of support for radical groups from Algeria to Egypt to Saudi Arabia. And yet one sees political Islam on the march across the Middle East today. Were we all wrong? Has Islamic fundamentalism gotten a second wind?

There are those who argue that the collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the war on terror, and the bloodshed in Afghanistan and Iraq have all contributed to the idea that Islam is under siege -- providing radicals with fresh ammunition. This is not, however, a wholly convincing case. For one thing, opposition to the Iraq War is not a radical phenomenon in the Middle East, but rather an utterly mainstream one. Almost every government opposed it. Moreover, the rise and fall of Islamic fundamentalism was a broad and deep phenomenon, born over decades. It could hardly reverse itself on the basis of a year's news. Does anyone believe that if there had been no Iraq war, Hamas would have lost? Or that the Danish cartoons would not have been published with no response?

The political Islamist movement has changed over the last 15 years. Through much of the 1980s and 1990s, Islamic fundamentalists had revolutionary aims. They sought the violent overthrow of Western-allied regimes to have them replaced with Islamic states. This desire for Islamic states and not Western-style democracies was at the core of their message. Often transnational in their objectives, they spoke in global terms. But it turned out that the appeal of this ideology was limited. People in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and countless other places rejected it; in fact, they grudgingly accepted the dictatorships they lived under rather than support violent extremism. In this sense, political Islam did fail.

But over time, many of the Islamists recognized this reality and began changing their program. They came to realize that shorn of violent overthrow, revolution and social chaos, their ideas could actually gain considerable popular

support. So they reinvented themselves, emphasizing not revolutionary overthrow but peaceful change, not transnational ideology but national reform. They were still protesting the dictators, but now they organized demonstrations in favor of democracy and honest politics.

There were extremist elements, of course, still holding true to the cause of the caliphate, and they broke off to create separate groups like al Qaeda. (Some of this radicalism remains within the diaspora communities of Europe more strongly than in the Middle East itself.) But it is notable that well before 9/11, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood condemned terrorism directed against the Mubarak regime, and it recently distanced itself even from the tactics of the Iraqi insurgency. It has sought instead to build support for its own social and political program in Egypt. For its part, not only did Hamas decide to participate in the elections -- for the first time -- but it campaigned almost entirely on a platform of anticorruption, social services and assertive nationalism. Only al Qaeda and its ilk have condemned any participation in elections, whether by Iraqi Islamist groups or by Hamas.

This coming to terms with democracy, however, should not be mistaken for a coming to terms with Western values such as liberalism, tolerance and freedom. The program that most of these groups espouse is deeply illiberal, involving the reversal of women's rights, second-class citizenship for minorities and confrontation with the West and Israel. The most dramatic example of these trends is in southern Iraq, where Shiite religious parties rule without any checks. Reports abound that civil servants and professors are subjected to religious and political tests, women are placed under strictures never before enforced in Iraq, and all kinds of harmless entertainment are being silenced by vigilantes. When entering the office of Iraq's prime minister, Ibrahim Jaafari, one now sees women swaddled in veils and gloves, a level of zeal rarely seen elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Some of these forces have gained strength because of a lack of other alternatives. For decades the Middle East has been a political desert. In Iraq, the reason that there are no countervailing liberal parties is that Saddam Hussein destroyed them. He could not completely crush mosque-based groups and, by the end of his reign, he actually used them to shore up his own legitimacy. In much of the Muslim world Islam became the language of political opposition because it was the only language that could not be censored. This

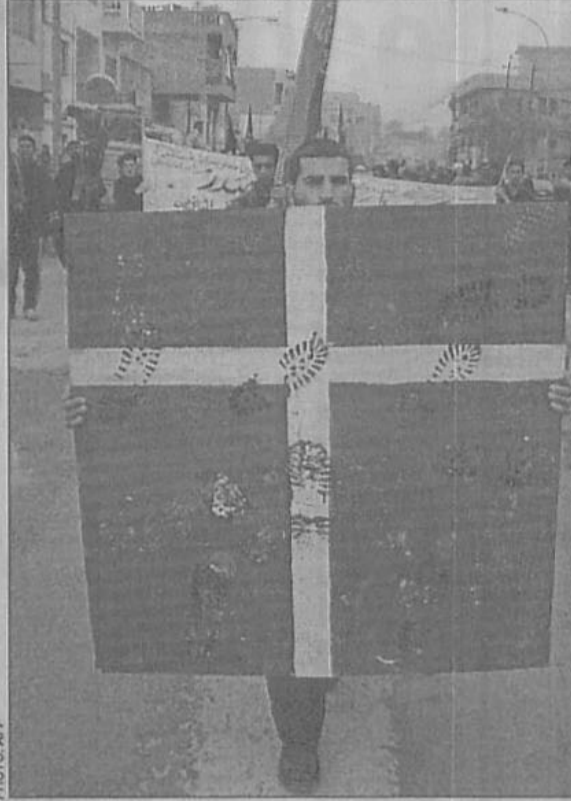


PHOTO: AFP

pattern, of dictators using religious groups to destroy the secular opposition, played itself out in virtually every Arab country, and often beyond. It was the method by which Pakistan's Gen. Zia ul-Haq maintained his own dictatorship in the 1980s, creating a far stronger fundamentalist movement than that country had ever known.

The broader reason for the rise of Islamic politics has been the failure of secular politics. Secularism exists in the Middle East. It is embodied by Saddam Hussein and Muammar Kaddafi and Hosni Mubarak and Yasir Arafat. Arabs believe that they have tried Western-style politics and it has brought them tyranny and stagnation. They feel that they got a bastardized version of the West and that perhaps the West was not the right model for them anyway. Islamic fundamentalism plays deeply to these feelings. It evokes authenticity, pride, cultural assertiveness and defiance. These ideas have been powerful sources of national identity throughout history and remain so, especially in an age of globalized economics and American power. In face of the powerlessness, alienation and confusion that the modern world breeds, these groups say simply, "Islam is the solution."

Inevitably we have to ask ourselves what to do about these movements that are rising to power. The first task is surely to understand them -- understand that they thrive on pride and a search for authenticity. These forces play themselves out in complex ways. It is obvious by now that the United States -- and

Europe as well -- understand countries like Iraq and Iran very little. In Iraq, the United States overturned old social structures and governing patterns with little thought as to what would replace them. We believed that democracy and freedom would solve the problems of disorder, division and dysfunction.

Or consider Iran. Many Americans had become convinced that the vast majority of Iranians hated their regime and were trying desperately to overthrow it; all we needed to do was help them foment a revolution. There's little doubt that the regime is brutal and unpopular. But it also appears to have some basis of support, in mosques, patronage systems and poorer parts of the country. And those who do not support it are not automatically Western liberals. After all, there was an election in Iran and, despite low turnout, the eventual vote was free and secret. (Back when the winner of Iranian elections was aliberal, Mohammed Khatami, people often cited the vote as proof that the fundamentalists were failing.) Five candidates took part in the most recent race. The pro-Western liberal came in fifth; the conservative West-basher came in first.

My own guess, and it is just a guess, is that some Iranians -- not a majority, but not a tiny minority, either -- accept their current regime. This is partly because of its ideology and patronage politics, and partly because of general inertia. (We have only to look at Iraq to see that Shiite religious figures do have some hold on their

populations.) Add to this an apparatus of repression and \$60-a-barrel oil and you have a regime that has many ways to stay in power. President Ahmadinejad understands these forces. He emphasizes in his daily television appearances not Islamic dogma but poverty alleviation, subsidies, anti-corruption projects and, above all, nationalism in the form of the nuclear program. Ahmadinejad may be a mystic, but most of his actions are those of a populist, using the forces that will work to keep him in power. This picture of Iran, gray and complex, is much less satisfying than the black-and-white caricature. But it might be closer to the truth.

Elections have not created political Islam in the Middle East. They have codified a reality that existed anyway. Hamas was already a major player to be reckoned with in Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood is popular in Egypt, whether or not Hosni Mubarak holds real elections. In fact, the more they are suppressed, the greater their appeal. If politics is more open, these groups may or may not moderate themselves, but they will surely lose some of that mystical allure they now have. The martyrs will become mayors, which is quite a fall in status.

But to accept these forces is not to celebrate them. It is important that religious intolerance and antimodern attitudes not be treated as cultural variations that must be respected. Whether it is Hindu intolerance in India, anti-Semitism in Europe or Muslim bigotry in Saudi Arabia, the mod-

ern world rightly condemns them all as violating universal values. Recent months have only highlighted that promoting democracy and promoting liberty in the Middle East are separate projects. Both have their place. But the latter -- promoting the forces of political, economic and social liberty -- is the more difficult and more important task. And unless we succeed at it, we will achieve a series of nasty democratic outcomes, as we are beginning to in so many of these places.

This fight is not one the fundamentalists are destined to win. The forces of liberalism have been stymied in the Middle East for decades. They need help. Recall that in Europe for much of the last 100 years, when liberal democrats were not given assistance, nationalists and communists often triumphed through the democratic processes.

Above all, the forces of moderation thrive in an atmosphere of success. Two Muslim societies in which there is little extremism are Turkey and Malaysia. Both are open politically and thriving economically. Compare Pakistan today -- growing at 8 percent a year -- with General Zia's country, and you can see why, for all the noise, fundamentalism is waning. If you are comfortable with the modern world, you are less likely to want to blow it up.

There are better and worse ways to handle radical Islam. We should not feed the fury that helps them win adherents. The Bush administration's arrogance has been a great boon to the nastiest groups

in the Middle East, which are seen as the only ones who can stand up to the imperial bully. We should recognize how varied these groups are: some violent, others not -- and work to divide rather than unite them. When, for example, Bush added Chechen brutalities to his list of "radical Islam," he made a mistake. Russia has waged a horrific war against Chechnya for two decades, killing more than 100,000 civilians. To speak of that conflict in the same breath as the London bombings, as Bush did, is to suggest that any time a Muslim kills, whatever the provocation, it's all the same to him.

Give Bush his due. He has correctly and powerfully argued that blind assistance to the dictatorships of the Middle East was a policy that was producing repression and instability. But he has not yet found a way to genuinely assist in the promotion of political, economic and social reforms in the region. A large part of the problem is that the United States -- and the West in general -- are not seen as genuine well-wishers and allies of the peoples of these countries in their aspirations for a better life. We have stopped partnering with repressive Middle Eastern regimes, but we have not yet managed to forge a real partnership with Middle Eastern societies.

(c) 2006, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.
Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.



INTERVIEW WITH TARO ASO, JAPANESE FOREIGN MINISTER

'Japan intends to prioritize development of the private sector [in Bangladesh], together with transportation and power'

February 10, 2006 marks the thirty-third anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationship between Japan and Bangladesh. On the eve of this occasion, Monzurul Huq, Tokyo correspondent of The Daily Star, interviewed Tarō Asō, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs. Excerpts.

Monzurul Huq: This year marks the thirty-third anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationship between Japan and Bangladesh. What is your assessment of this relationship and how do you think the two countries can further improve mutual understanding?

Tarō Asō: Japan was among the first to recognize Bangladesh's sovereign status after its independence in 1972. Even prior to independence and continuing to the present, Japan has continuously provided assistance to Bangladesh for poverty reduction and economic development, among other purposes.

Japan and Bangladesh have many common aspects. For example, partially due to the fact that both our countries are susceptible to natural disasters, both Japanese and Bangladeshi are diligent in nature, and in the face of nature's might they have learned to adopt lifestyles that are in harmony with nature. A love of nature, inclinations toward poetry and song, and bonsai trees are other examples. The people of Bangladesh also seem to feel a strong affinity to Japan.

Since Bangladesh's independence, our two countries have maintained and developed friendly relationship, which Japan intends to cherish.

HE Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia paid a visit to Japan in July 2005. This was the first time in eight years for a Bangladeshi Prime Minister to visit Japan and thus it provided an important opportunity to further promote friendly bilateral relations. The Japan-

Bangladesh Joint Press Statement, issued after the summit meeting between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan, provides the future orientation for our relations, including the expansion of trade and investment relations, natural disaster prevention measures, and cooperation in facing global challenges, including terrorism. In accordance with the Joint Press Statement, I intend to further develop our bilateral relations.

To date, more than 2,000 Bangladeshi nationals have studied in Japan under the Japanese government-sponsored scholarship scheme. Young Bangladeshi people having come to Japan have exceeded 5,000 through training provided by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and others. Each year, more than 400 young people from Bangladesh are engaged in study and training in Japan.

Among these students who came to study in Japan, one of the most distinguished figures is HE Mr. M. Morshed Khan, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Foreign Minister Khan attended a Japanese university in the 1960s, and he and I have been friends ever since. For this reason Bangladesh is a country that is very close to me as well.

These people-to-people exchanges serve as a foundation for an even closer relationship, and I am confident that the relations of mutual understanding and trust between our countries will continue to deepen.

Japan is the largest donor for Bangladesh. There are some reservations among a number of European donors that the aid

given to Bangladesh has not been utilized properly because of corruption and other malpractices. Being the largest donor, does Japan also share such feeling?

I believe that, for Bangladesh, improving governance is one of the main pillars for policy efforts to achieve development and poverty reduction and also to promote trade and investment.

In July last year, on the occasion of the Japan-Bangladesh summit meeting, the Bangladesh side expressed its commitment to its continuing efforts to promote good governance. Japan understands that Bangladesh is making earnest efforts in this regard.

In cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh and other donor countries and organizations, the Government of Japan intends to assist Bangladesh in improving governance which, the Government of Bangladesh is currently undertaking, including assistance for its efforts to improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies, improve civil servants' training programs, raising resident participation in local government and enhancing transparency, as well as in capacity building efforts in implementation skills in major sectors.

Despite a troubled political atmosphere and other difficulties, the economy of Bangladesh continues to grow at a rate above 5 percent, which could have been much higher if there were less political disturbances. Under the prevailing situation, how do you evaluate the investment climate in Bangladesh? Japanese investment in Bangladesh in the past has not been that encouraging, which

stood at around US\$32.18 million in 2004. Does the Japanese government have any plan to encourage private sector investment in Bangladesh, particularly in areas like textile, pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, electronics and leather products -- where Bangladesh could achieve modest gain in recent past?

At the Bangladesh Business Seminar held in Japan to coincide with the visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, there was vigorous discussion concerning the enhancement of trade and investment between Japan and Bangladesh. In addition, the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO) and the Government of Bangladesh concluded an agreement that will enable the people of Bangladesh to acquire training and technical expertise at private companies in Japan. It may be possible to consider developments such as these as an indicator of increased momentum for investment in Bangladesh.

As was confirmed in the joint press statement on the occasion of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Japan, the both governments will provide assistance and cooperation in order to strengthen bilateral economic relations. Although it is difficult for the Government of Japan to encourage private sector companies to invest in specific sectors, I believe it to be of extreme importance that assistance is provided for the improvement of the trade and investment environment through dialogue and economic cooperation among concerned parties, including the Government of Bangladesh.

friendliest nations of Bangladesh, what is your impression of the current political situation in the country? Does Japan have any plan to contribute in the successful holding of the next general election?

Japan expects that the upcoming general election will be free and fair, and that it will reflect the will of the people of Bangladesh.

Japan has previously provided assistance for consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh, including personnel exchange, technical cooperation, and the dispatch of election observers. Japan intends to continue such assistance, utilizing our knowledge, experience and technology.

Japan has recently been given the observer status to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). How do you think Japan is going to use that position in making SAARC a viable organization capable of making meaningful contribution to improve the situation of the people of the region? Do you foresee the possibility of emerging South Asia as an influential economic entity?

Japan highly appreciates that it was granted observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in the 13th SAARC Summit held in Dhaka in November last year.

Japan has long recognized the importance of SAARC as an organization that can provide a framework for stability and development in the South Asian region. Based on this recognition, Japan has supported the activities of SAARC and worked to enhance its foundations through the Japan-SAARC Special Fund since 1993. This was the first and the only financial assistance from a country outside the SAARC region.

Japan intends to continue to make efforts to further strengthen our relations with SAARC, in close

cooperation with all member countries, including Bangladesh, the chair country. One idea is to strengthen functional cooperation, utilizing the Japan-SAARC Special Fund, in a form whereby it is possible to share Japan's knowledge and expertise in issues that are of particular interest in this region, such as the fight against terrorism and disaster prevention.

Japanese policy-makers are now calling for Tokyo's closer tie with India. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made an official visit to the country last year and you too visited India in early January. Would this Japanese approach mean less priority attached to other South Asian Nations? How do you see the possibility of Bangladesh joining the proposed East Asian Community?

Japan believes that in recent years, the political and economic importance of not only India, but the South Asian region as a whole has been increasing. Japan places importance on relations with Bangladesh as a moderate Islamic country and one that is making efforts towards the stability of the South Asian region. Last year, Japan actively supported Bangladesh's candidature to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In East Asia, with a common goal for the formation of an East Asian community (EAC) in the future, various kinds of regional cooperation are being progressed. I expect that Bangladesh will make a constructive contribution to such regional cooperation.

Japan is trying to get a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. An earlier initiative taken jointly by Japan, Germany, India and Brazil failed to win necessary support, and as a result, Japan is now rethinking its position to launch again country's bid, coming out of the formal set-up of G4. What will be Tokyo's

stand in connection with the same bid by Germany, India and Brazil? Is Japan planning to approach Bangladesh to rethink its earlier objection to G4 proposal and support Tokyo's independent bid to win a permanent seat at the UNSC?

Recently Germany, India and Brazil submitted a draft resolution on Security Council Reform to the General Assembly of the United Nations. Japan is currently exploring a proposal that would gain support from a greater number of member states, rather than submitting a draft resolution that has no real prospect of being adopted with the support of more than two-thirds majority.

It was from this viewpoint that Japan has refrained from cosponsoring the draft resolution together with the countries mentioned above. We have thoroughly explained our position to Germany, India and Brazil and gained their understanding on this matter. Japan remains committed to the trust and cooperation among the G4.

With regard our relations with Bangladesh, in the joint press statement issued on the occasion of Prime Minister Zia's visit to Japan in July last year, Bangladesh reiterated its support for Japan's permanent membership in the Security Council, and also stated that it would give due consideration to the G4 Draft Framework Resolution on Security Council Reform.

In any event, Japan intends to continue its efforts towards the realization of reform in a manner that will garner support of more than two-thirds of member states and ensure ratification by countries concerned. Japan considers that support from Bangladesh, based on our friendship, is very important.