

Dialogue prospect being complicated

Irresponsible utterances are highly demoralising

EXCHANGE of intemperate words by government and opposition leaders hot on the heels of Prime Minister's offer of a dialogue between the secretaries general of the ruling BNP and the opposition AL is vitiating the atmosphere for the talks to begin at all, let alone prove productive. It is the compelling necessity of the moment that both sides engaged in a meaningful discourse over the pressing issues of Election Commission and Caretaker Government reforms.

The prime minister rather than taking forward her much-awaited proposal by saying new positive things has surprised us by her dismissive and condescending remarks against the opposition apparently provoked by some utterances from the leaders on the other side. Knowing full well that it is on her initiative that fulfillment of the reform agenda hinges, she being the leader of the majority, can she allow herself to be so easily temperamental against the opposition's words? This is what she has said, "We are least bothered whether anyone accepts it (offer for talks) or not", implying that elections could be held with other political parties than AL which is a reiteration of what she had said before about elections sans AL. But her idiom should have improved rhyming with her clear-cut endorsement of a secretaries general level talks. It's alright that she is putting up a brave face before the opposition declared programmes but to say that she was trying to bring the opposition on to the 'right track' was being naively patronising.

The public are greatly confused by the contradictory signals from the prime minister. Mixed signals are also coming from the top opposition leaders. Concomitantly, the nation is baffled as to what the both sides are up to!

Abdul Jalil has suggested that one has to see why the PM has made the offer for talks, whether she has done so under donor pressure or out of concern for today's opposition programme. The AL chief has also made taunting remarks about the PM's overture. But the fact of the matter is that the PM has made an offer and it should be reciprocated and built upon rather than be undermined.

The public feel frustrated by this trading of demoralising comments between both sides. We urge them to stop the diatribe and get on with the job of starting the dialogue.

Manmohan-Musharraf summit

A welcome development

INDIA and Pakistan have expressed their readiness to resume the dialogue process stalled following the bomb attacks at Mumbai in July last. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Pervez Musharraf have agreed, as they met on the sidelines of the Havana Non-Aligned Summit, to keep open all the options for negotiated settlement to the thorny issues that plague the relations between the two neighbours.

New Delhi and Islamabad appeared to be making steady progress in peace talks before the Mumbai bombings which India blamed on a Pakistan-based Islamic militant group. However, the Non-Aligned Summit created the opportunity for the two leaders to restart the dialogue process which is needed for not only peace between the two countries but also for stability of the region as a whole. The very important area where they have agreed to cooperate with each other include the resolve to fight terror. If they can set up a joint institutional mechanism to contain terrorism, as they have agreed to, it will indeed be a breakthrough. Obviously, terrorism is a major irritant, after the unresolved Kashmir issue, that the two sides have failed to handle to each other's satisfaction so far.

The two leaders also addressed the Kashmir issue and agreed to implement the joint statements that were issued following talks between the two countries on four occasions in the last two years.

One of the most significant developments is that the Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon said, following the talks that India drew a distinction between the terrorist elements in Pakistan and the government of that country. The statement is significant for the obvious reason that it would clear the path for New Delhi to interact with Islamabad with a more open mind. It will also isolate the terrorists taking advantage of the highly antagonistic relations between the two governments.

India and Pakistan, being nuclear-capable countries, shoulder the responsibility of defusing tension in the region. And amicable resolution of the problems existing between them will also help Saarc function more effectively in future as they are the two key players in the regional grouping.

A new low



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

SAVAGERY and barbarism are words that only partly describe the police excesses during the AL-led opposition's siege program on the twelfth last. Millions watched the attack on the television screen with anger, outrage, and indignation. The swash-buckling police unleashed the atrocity during the opposition's political program, wreaking havoc on the activists taking part in it.

In a targeted attack, they swooped with fury and vengeance on the remaining few leaders of the AL, while others were earlier taken care of. It seems, after having decimated the top AL leadership over the years, the ruling regime now

ostensibly wants the others to be removed from the political scene also. At least the pattern of political elimination in this country points to that ominous possibility.

In an ensuing clash between the public and the police, the latter, with their superior contrivance, had the upper hand, while the activists were thoroughly beaten up. The police did not stop at that, and chased the female activists indoors and clubbed them there. The sad spectacle of a female activist with her garment removed by the police appeared in the print media the next day. She symbolized the collective shame of a nation that is rotten to its core.

Are we then going back to the dark ages when only the rule of the jungle prevailed? Are the

PERSPECTIVES

If the ruling alliance still believes that the people are on their side, in spite of what they have wrought -- let there be a fair game, a fair election. If the people again choose them -- well, good luck to the alliance! But the game must be played on level ground. The people are more than convinced that it is beyond the present Election Commission, whose credibility is zero, to provide a level field.

police above the law? Are we then witnessing the ruling party cadres in action in the garb of police? The nation is indeed disturbed at this attitude of the law enforcers, as well as their political masters. All we understand is that the professional police cannot behave in this manner. If it is at the behest of the higher authority the police are unknowingly playing with the fire and creating a Frankenstein.

Political activism is universally recognized in any democratic polity. Even today's power wielders resorted to it in the past. Under what edict did they hold their political showdown, causing immeasurable hardships to the citizenry, on the founding day of the BNP? How did that then become holy? Whenever the opposition takes

to the streets, the BNP heavyweights start shedding crocodile tears at the hardship of the public. But did they ever shed a single drop of tear at the hardship and miseries of the people brought about by their misuse, bungling, and corruption? There is a limit to hypocrisy.

By now few in this country are unaware of the alliance's electoral game plan to stage a comeback. Yet they cannot protest and get it redressed. The authorities have resorted to force, guile, and all kinds of unpleasantness to stifle the critical voice. The alliance's top leadership seems to have taken to showmanship to tide over its difficulties. It is a virtue only when there is positivism inherent in it. Or else it will snowball into greater disaster.

We have seen enough of the cops' alacrity and efficiency in beating up opposition activists. Let some of those efficiencies be diverted now to fight crime in the society. Their chivalry lies in protecting woman, not beating them up. Their image has already been blurred, let it not be further smudged. There is the disturbing news of about 12,000 party cadres being inducted as law enforcers in different capacities. Let the cops play their professional role to make the society a little better than what it is now.

While the AL-led 14-party alliance is still firm on its stand of "no reforms, no election," the BNP-led 4-party alliance leaders are in the field wooing the electorate. Their delirious rhetoric of "unnayan" (development) is at its peak, although a baffled public saw more the signs of decay and decrepitude around them during the last five years.

If the ruling alliance still believes that the people are on their side, in spite of what they have wrought -- let there be a fair game, a fair election. If the people again choose them -- well, good luck to the alliance! But the game must be played on level

ground. The people are more than convinced that it is beyond the present Election Commission, whose credibility is zero, to provide a level field.

That is the issue at hand to be resolved. The prime minister, rather arrogantly, gave a damn to the popular demand for reforms, thus further complicating the issue. The BNP-Jamaat leadership, blinded by its lust for power, has held the nation hostage by its intransigence and is engaged in an undeclared war with the opposition as well as the people. People are waiting eagerly to see how the end game of the political episode is going to be played.

There is a flicker of hope in the government's swagger which has peaked at the moment. If history is any guide, this is usually the sign of a repressive, unjust, and corrupt dispensation before it falls. When nothing -- no persuasion, agitation, or even a miracle -- works, nature intervenes. Maybe the teeming millions of the country, lashed by the worst ever misrule, are just awaiting that.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Holier than me



M.J. AKBAR

AN intriguing part of the conversation between the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologos and "an educated Persian" now made world-famous by Pope Benedict XVI, is that the Persian seems to have no name. There is no mention of it in the speech made by the Holy Father during his "Apostolic Journey" to the University of Regensburg on 9/12.

The Persian must have been an intellectual of some importance if he was good enough to merit an audience with an "erudite" emperor. Does his name exist in the original text, since it was "presumably the Emperor himself who set down this dialogue, during the siege of Constantinople between 1394 and 1402?"

Was the name mentioned in the version produced by Professor Theodore Khoury, which the Pope has read, and which he used in a speech on a critical aspect of a sensitive theme at a time of conflict, on the Islamic doctrine of "holy war"? I ask because names lend greater credibility to text. Was the name omitted because Muslims of the educated kind preferred anonymity? Not at all. Imam Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun were household names at the time of this dialogue.

There are other uncertainties in the Pope's speech, which

BYLINE

What is aggravating is that the Pope has been free with assumptions, and liberal with its first cousin, innuendo. The peaceful piety of Manuel becomes an indictment of Islam, which is held to be violent in preference and doctrine. The innuendo is cleverly expressed, indicating that some effort has been taken to be clever.

purports to be about "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections" in which he quotes Manuel's ignorant, but, given the history of the early and medieval Church's continual diatribe against Islam and its Prophet, predictable view. This discussion on "holy war" appeared in the seventh conversation and was "rather marginal to the dialogue as a whole."

It is interesting that Pope Benedict should select what was "rather marginal" for emphasis and ignore the apparently more substantive issues that were discussed. What is genuinely disconcerting is that the Holy Father should accept Manuel's taunting, erroneous, and provocative depiction of the Prophet's message without any qualification.

Pope Benedict is not at all disturbed by phrases as insulting as "evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." This is utterly wrong, as even a cursory understanding of Islam would have made apparent. Are the Pope's speechwriters equally biased or ignorant? The Pope treated Manuel's observation and commentary as self-evident truth.

I have a further question: Why didn't the Pope quote the Persian scholar's answer to Manuel? It was a conversation, after all. Are we to believe that

the Persian gave no answer, that he did not challenge such ranting? He could not have been much of a scholar in that case. If he did not reply, he justifies his anonymity.

I am not erudite enough to have read the dialogue in the original Greek, or Professor Khoury's edited version of it. I can only go by the Pope's speech in German.

Some uncertainties can be explained by the distance of six centuries, as for instance the sentence that the conversation took place "perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara." The fact that we are reading Manuel's record, rather than the Persian's, also explains why it lays more stress on the emperor's view of theology.

What is aggravating is that the Pope has been free with assumptions, and liberal with its first cousin, innuendo. The peaceful piety of Manuel becomes an indictment of Islam, which is held to be violent in preference and doctrine. The innuendo is cleverly expressed, indicating that some effort has been taken to be clever. The famous verse of the Quran, that "There is no compulsion in religion," is juxtaposed with the proposition that "According to the experts this is one of the Suras of the early period when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat."

The implication is that when he was not under threat he drew out his sword and went on a rampage. This is the kind of propaganda that the Church used to put out with abandon in the early days, adding gratuitous comments about believers and "infidels." This is the line that those who have made it their business to hate Muslims use till today. But the Vatican had stopped such vilification, and it is unfortunate that Pope Benedict has revived it.

If he had consulted a few experts who understood Islam, he might have been better educated on "holy war." It is absolutely correct that no war verse was sent down to the Prophet during his Mecca phase. Despite the severest persecution, to the point where he almost lost his life, he never advocated violence. There are innumerable verses in the Quran extolling the merits of peace, and a peaceful solution to life's problems -- including a preference for peace over war.

The Quran treats Christians and Jews as people of the Book, despite the fact that they did not accept the Prophet's message. It praises Jesus as "Ruh-Allah," or one touched by the spirit of Allah (this is the best translation I can think of). Mary, mother of Jesus, is accepted as a virgin, although the Quran is equally clear that Jesus is a man, and not the son of God.

The war verses were sent to

the Prophet only when he had been in Medina for some time, and become not only a leader of the community but also head of a multi-faith state. War, in other words, is permitted as an exercise in statecraft, and not for personal reasons, including persecution. Further, it is circumscribed with important conditions. Surely no one, including Pope Benedict, believes that a state cannot ever take recourse to war? Indeed, the history of the Vatican is filled with war. The Quran's view of war, as an answer to injustice, certainly merits more understanding than censure.

Manuel's view is better understood in the context of his times. He was monarch of a once-glorious, but now dying, empire. The Ottomans had been slicing off its territory for centuries; the first Crusade had been called by Pope Urban II three centuries before to save the Byzantines from Muslim Turks. The heart of the empire, Constantinople, was now under serious threat. If Tamerlane (another Muslim) had not suddenly appeared from the east and decimated the Ottomans, Constantinople might have fallen during that siege which so depressed Manuel. It was hardly a moment when the Byzantine could have the most charitable view of an Islamic holy war.

What is less understandable is why Pope Benedict should endorse a fallacy. The present Pope is not a successor to the great and wise John Paul II. He is heir to predecessors like Pope Nicholas V who issued "The Bull Romanus Pontifex" in January 1455. This Holy Father sought "to bestow favours and special graces on Catholic

and princes, who ... not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens (that is, Muslims) and of other infidels and enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defence and increase of the faith to vanquish them." He then praises King Alfonso for going to remote places "to bring into the bosom of his faith the perfidious enemies of him and of the life-giving Cross by which we have been redeemed, name the Saracens and other infidels."

And so on. This was the philosophy that created the Inquisition in which Muslims and Jews were killed and driven out of Catholic kingdoms in Spain and Portugal after the Christian reconquests. Do note that Muslims did not have any exclusive copyright over the use of the term "infidel."

I have no particular desire to introduce 16th century dialectic into contemporary attempts to bridge inter-faith misunderstanding, but it is pertinent that Nicholas V became Pope some sixty years after Manuel's conversations with the unnamed Persian. Equally, there is no point in quoting from, say, Dante's rather bilious descriptions of the Prophet and Hazrat Ali, for that language belongs to a different world.

A suggestion to those who believe in an "international outcry." Hyper-reactions tend to suggest nervousness. Islam is not a weak doctrine; it is built on rock, not sand. Reason is a more effective weapon than anger.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The Pope owes a personal apology

Honest students of history will tell us that religious tolerance, racial harmony and cultural diversity are not British, American, or even European inventions. For more than a thousand years, churches and synagogues rested peacefully alongside the mosques throughout the Islamic world. Now, let us ask ourselves, while we're on the subject of tolerance, how many mosques were there in Christian Europe during that time? Who can forget the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition? Are they ever branded as Christian terrorists?

DR. SULTAN AHMAD

IN an address in Germany on Tuesday, September 12 at Regensburg University in Germany, Pope Benedict XVI quoted from a book, recounting a conversation between 14th-century Byzantine Christian Emperor Manuel Paleologos II and a Persian scholar on the truths of Christianity and Islam: "The emperor comes to speak about the issue of jihad, holy war," Benedict said. "He said, I quote, 'Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.'" The Pope must be

cognizant of how the emperors used to write and manipulate history for their own vested interests.

By presenting the quote, the Pope himself has ratified the conversation. This has angered and outraged the Muslims and violent protests are staged against the Pope throughout the whole Muslim world. They have rightfully demanded personal apology from the Pope. Can anybody show a single example where any Islamic leader, thinker, or scholar has ever made any derogatory remarks, like the Pope, about any of the prophets like Musa (Moses) or Isa (Jesus)? The answer will be no. Why? Because the Muslims

as a part of their faith must believe in all the prophets and the holy books that were revealed to them from Allah. As Allah stated in the Holy Quran:

"The Messenger believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one (of them) believeth in Allah, His angels, His books, and His apostles." "We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of His apostles." And they say: "We hear, and we obey: (We seek) Thy forgiveness, our Lord, and all journeys culminate in Thee." (Surah Al-Baqarah: 285)

History testifies that Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) was persecuted and forced to flee from the

land of his birth. He came back victorious after 10 years. In that moment of victory, he was the superpower of Arabia. He could have annihilated all his enemies -- yet, not a single drop of blood was shed -- he performed Jihad of the highest order, when he forgave his enemies. Prophet Jesus (as) did not pray for revenge -- he controlled his inner desire ("nafs") for revenge, sympathy, and sense of justice.

History once again testifies that in all the eighty-two encounters between the Muslims and the non-Muslims during the life of the Holy Prophet (pbuh), only 1,018 persons lost their lives on both sides. Out of them, 259 were Muslims, whereas the remaining 759 belonged to the opposite camp. One wonders at the audacity of these writers only when one compares the religious wars of Charles the Great with the jihads of Muslims. Those crusades cold-bloodedly claimed 4,300 pagan Saxons. Do these examples testify that Islam was spread by the sword as quoted by the Pope?

Honest students of history will

tell us that religious tolerance, racial harmony and cultural diversity are not British, American, or even European inventions. For more than a thousand years, churches and synagogues rested peacefully alongside the mosques throughout the Islamic world. Now, let us ask ourselves, while we're on the subject of tolerance, how many mosques were there in Christian Europe during that time? Who can forget the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition? Are they ever branded as Christian terrorists?

Over the centuries, in Ottoman Turkey and Muslim Spain, it was these true believers who cared for the wretched and the persecuted. If we study the history of Islam, we will find that Muslims were the protectors of persecuted minorities like the Jews. While Jewish people were persecuted in Europe, Muslims not only gave them shelter, but also employed their talents at the highest levels of the empire, in great Islamic cities like Istanbul, Cairo, Fez, Granada, and Cordoba.

Islam being their rival religion, many Christian writers tried to defame Islam, that ranges from willful distortion to misinterpretation prompted by sheer ignorance. During the Colonial period of the British the colonial regime, for political reasons, used the Church for propaganda against Islam. Even today there are many Westerners for whom Islam can be reduced to three ideas: fanaticism, fatalism and polygamy. One should not condemn a nation or a religion or a country, based on the actions of a few individuals. Generalizations breed hatred. Hatred is a cancer that destroys the bearer of this disease. Unfortunately, many world media organizations mischievously spread baseless accusations against Islam without evidence.

The Pope's old partner, Professor Hans Kung, a former colleague of his at Tubingen University, argues that the Pope did not intend to provoke Muslims. "He is very interested in dialogue with all religions. But using this quotation and his

whole approach to Islam in the lecture was very unfortunate," he said.

He found it incredible that the Pope had quoted an emperor, a Christian adversary of Islam, who had set down the comments while in the middle of a battle, the siege of Constantinople in 1394 to 1402.

"If a Jewish person said such a thing about a Christian, we would also be offended," said Professor Kung. "He can, of course, quote what he wants, but he did this without saying the emperor was incorrect."

"This just shows the limits of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger (now with the new name Benedict XVI). He never studied the religions thoroughly and very obviously has a unilateral view of Islam and the other religions."

See how the political leaders have reacted. Salih Kapusuz, deputy leader of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamic-rooted party, said Benedict's remarks were either "the result of pitiful ignorance" about Islam and its prophet or, worse, a deliberate

distortion.

"He has a dark mentality that comes from the darkness of the Middle Ages. He is a poor thing that has not benefited from the spirit of reform in the Christian world," Kapusuz told Turkish state media. "It looks like an effort to revive the mentality of the Crusades."

"Benedict, the author of such unfortunate and insolent remarks, is going down in history for his words," Kapusuz added. "He is going down in history in the same category as leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini." Even Turkey's staunchly pro-secular opposition party demanded the pope apologize before his visit. Another party led a demonstration outside Ankara's largest mosque, and a group of about 50 people placed a black wreath outside the Vatican's diplomatic mission.

Did the support of the Pope to the conversation is Just due to his ignorance about Islam or an effort to revive the mentality of the Crusades once again. The Pope alone has the answer.