

Coddling religious extremists for political gains

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE recent newspaper headlines in Pakistan and elsewhere have put Lal Masjid -- a mosque and seminary in Islamabad -- and its denizens on the world map. The horrific incidents surrounding the mosque, and the resulting mayhem, are an object lesson on how things can go awry, with disastrous results, when a government coddles religious elements and religious institutions, either for political reasons or for fear of public backlash.

The Lal Masjid is a seminary that provides religious education based on Deobondi curriculum to about 7,000 students in the male and female sections.

The mosque, constructed and funded by the Pakistan government, was originally the main mosque in Islamabad, patronized by government officials including top brass.

Its central location placed it within close proximity to various government offices, the ISI among them. A senior government official originally served as the Imam of the mosque. But that was Pakistan before the incursion of religious extremism into Pakistani politics, led by General Ziaul Huq.

With General Ziaul Huq leading the country in the heady days of the US assisted fight against the Russians in Afghanistan, the Lal Masjid turned into a madrasa, training students who would be cannon fodder for the holy war. This happened during the time when Abdullah, the father of the current Lal Masjid imam Abdul Aziz, was the mosque prayer leader. General Ziaul Huq was reportedly a great admirer of Abdullah, who was known for his fiery "jihadi" speeches.

Abdul Aziz succeeded his father as the Imam of Lal Masjid after the demise of Abdullah in a sectarian strife in 1990 or thereabout. Trained in renowned madrasa in Karachi, and having worked closely with the Afghan mujahidin that his father's madrasa had trained, both Abdul Aziz and his brother Abdur Rashid became firebrand radicals who would later use the Lal Masjid to train young minds in their school of thought. However, the clash with the government would not occur until much later. Abdul Aziz, his brother and his wife, would carry on their agenda under the very nose of ISI.

The first brush with the government occurred in 2005, when Abdul Aziz issued a fatwa against

the army officers who were fighting against Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas close to the Afghan border. For this reason he was dismissed from his mosque position by the government, but he refused to vacate the mosque.

With his baton-wielding acolytes (men and women) in the madrasa he turned the mosque and the adjoining seminary into a fortress, daring any law-enforcing agency to oust him. The government relented.

Next came protests by the madrasa students against the government's campaign to demolish illegally constructed mosques in Islamabad. They followed these protests along with their teachers, threatening the owners of video and music shops in Islamabad to close down their businesses or face dire consequences.

The female students of the seminary, assisted by the male students, raided an alleged brothel house and kidnapped three women from there. They held them hostage for three days before releasing them, after securing confessional statements saying that they were involved in "immoral activities." All this happened under the watchful eyes of Pakistani and international media.

The most egregious of the unlawful activities was, however, when the students and their teachers abducted three policemen when they were going in search of students who were breaking the law. This time also, the government relented. Instead of carrying out any massive attack the police negotiated the release of the three policemen. Another victory for the radicals and their leader.

It took several months for the Pakistan government to realize that it was time to take the bull by the horn. The demon it was nurturing close to its core was giving birth to hundreds of radicals who were being shipped to fight its army and botch its war on terrorism from within.

Ironically, it was fighting the very elements that were born out of direct government subsidy and, later, of sheer neglect. At the time of writing, the siege of the mosque was still on, with uncertain outcome.

Still, action taken now will be far better than taken later, when the radicals bred by the seminary would have spread much wider, preaching and practicing their violence all over the country to implement their goals.

Is there a lesson to be learnt

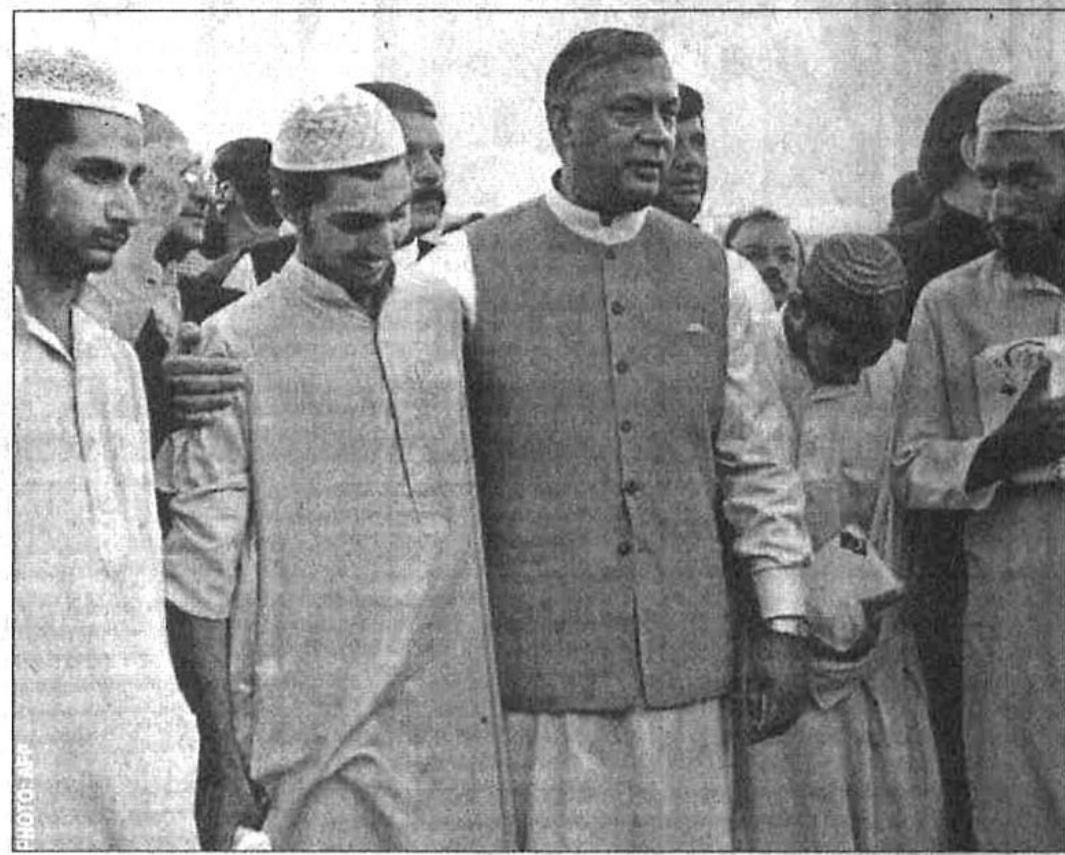
from all this? Use of religion for short-term political gains is not unknown -- at least that we know from the history of Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the 60s, Ayub Khan gathered the support of the ulema for his regime.

General Ziaul Huq not only indulged the religious elements, but considered himself as the new messiah. Pakistan is still reaping the harvest of the seeds that he had sown. In Bangladesh in the mid-seventies, General Zia was blessed in a national gathering of the Mudarreseen (Association of Madrasa teachers). Later, we saw the repetition of the blessing of the dictatorship of General Ershad by the same elements.

Ironically, where military leaders had stopped short of embracing the religious elements as their political partners, the political leaders who followed the military dictators sought them as allies to spur their opponents. This dangerous gambit of political opportunism later supported the growth of the kind of religious extremism that we would see with shock and disbelief.

We came out this time paying a low price for this political shenanigan, but we may not be so lucky the next time around.

Our political party leaders often speak of conspiracies against our



democracy. Few of them seem to realize that these conspiracies do not come from without, but from within the party.

These come from their inability

to recognize that the forces that seek to usurp state power with violent means first work silently with connivance of allies that they set up in powerful quarters. We

need to be watchful that the Lal Masjid experience is not repeated elsewhere.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Population: From explosion to implosion?

KOICHIRO MATSUURA

THREE unprecedented shifts are taking place in world population. Before 2000, the young always outnumbered their elders: for some years now it has been the other way around. Until now, there have always been more people in the countryside than in towns or cities; within the next few years this will no longer be so. And since 2003, for the first time, most people have been living in a country or region of the world where fertility is below the strict replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. In the last fifty years median fertility has fallen from 5.4 to 2.1.

Six significant developments will stand out in future world population trends, as recently discussed in one of Unesco's "21st Century Talks" organised by Jerome Bindé on the subject: "Population: from explosion to implosion?"

The population growth of the latter 20th century will come to be seen as one of the biggest events in history. Though slowing, this significant increase has by no means come to an end: today's 6.6 billion can be expected, under the United Nations' "middle" scenario, to reach 9.2 billion by 2050.

Secondly, there is an abrupt slowdown in the rate of growth, due to the demographic transition. Taking hold increasingly in the South as well -- even in Africa its first signs are to be seen in a number of countries -- this transition shows that there is nothing inevitable about population matters. We shall look back on the



unevenly distributed, 10% of the world's dry land accommodating over 60% of its people. Then life expectancy at birth varies almost

twofold between the most developed countries and some of the poorest, such as Sierra Leone or Afghanistan. Infant mortality

rates have fallen considerably, but the fall has been much slower in certain Asian countries, and particularly slow in Africa.

Lastly, there is another uneven but generally destabilising trend which will impose an increasing burden: the aging of the population as a result of lower fertility and higher life expectancy. This will affect different societies in very different ways. In 2050, nearly one person in three in the North will be over sixty years old, and one in five in the developing countries.

A spectre is haunting the aging societies of the North: the spectre of depopulation, which could have serious effects on many countries in the next few decades if the numbers are not made up by migration. Furthermore, the world's richest countries are in danger of a general loss of dynamism, problematic relations between the generations, and difficulties in funding their social security and retirement arrangements, to say nothing of ethical dilemmas such as whether to prolong life to the utmost or ensure a decent old age for all.

The South will face the agonising question of how to cope with an aging population when state-based social protection systems of sickness insurance or pension schemes are absent, yet traditional forms of social and family solidarity are crumbling under modernisation and urbanisation.

It is possible, however, that within a few decades population could begin to implode the whole world over, for there is not the slightest reason to assume that the decline in fertility, once started, will miraculously stop at replacement level.

Meanwhile there are immediate challenges to be faced. I have

just touched on the challenge of international migration, but there is a whole battery of others: food security, jobs, the fight against poverty, public health, housing, infrastructure, the environment, and the promotion of sustainable development.

Will there, for example, be enough for everyone to eat in this world where encroaching deserts and sprawling cities are helping to reduce the area of farmland per person, which is expected to fall from 2,800m² in the early 1990s to 1,700m² in 2025? Even though rising food production has consistently outrun population growth in recent decades, there is no denying that a further "Green Revolution" is needed if the challenges of the future are to be met.

As early as 1795, Condorcet had the exceptional foresight to realize that the danger of over-population, which he saw could lead to a "diminution of happiness," could be mastered through a rise in productivity, better management, the prevention of waste and the spread of education -- especially girls' education.

Realising the threat which population might come to pose to the environment, Condorcet already had an answer: "dematerialised" growth. "The same level of production," he wrote, "will be achievable with less destruction of raw produce, or alternatively will last longer."

Population growth also challenges development itself, however, and hampers the fight against poverty: over the next quarter century the countries of the South are going to need to

find room for no fewer than a billion new arrivals on the labour market -- yet the phenomenon of "jobless growth" is stalking developed and developing countries alike.

Given these challenges, what are our priorities? Only the emergence of real "knowledge societies" holds out any prospect of coping with population growth and aging. We have no choice but to work for equitable growth and development founded on intelligence, science, technology, and a change in our ways of living, producing and consuming. The greatest priority of all will assuredly be education.

Basic education first and foremost; and especially the education of girls, the best contraceptive of all. According to one study, there are regions where girls are excluded from secondary schooling and the women have an average of seven children each. Where girls' school enrolment is just 40%, this mean figure falls to three. Life-long education for all ought to be recognized as an essential priority as well; for this is the answer to aging populations and rising life expectancy.

As knowledge and skills become outdated more rapidly, and people face the need to keep up by retraining or changing occupation, the demand for education is increasingly going to become a life-long matter. At bottom, this is good news: the world population will become older, admittedly; but individual humans will spend more of their lives in what counts as "youth" -- for they will never stop learning.

Koichiro Matsuura is Director General, Unesco.

Aga Khan's golden jubilee



PARID HOSSAIN

TODAY marks the 50th anniversary of the Aga Khan's becoming the

Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. Ismailis all over the world, including those in Bangladesh, are celebrating the golden jubilee of the Aga Khan's

leadership, which has shaped not only their own community but also the world, especially the developing nations.

The Aga Khan was just 20 years old when he succeeded his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan on July 11, 1957. He is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, and a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, the first Imam, and his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.

Son of Prince Aly Khan and Princess Tajuddawlah Aly Khan, the Aga Khan was born on December 13, 1936, in Geneva. Having spent his early childhood in Nairobi, Kenya, he attended Le Rosey School in

Switzerland for nine years before graduating from Harvard University in 1959 with a BA honours degree in Islamic history.

Like his grandfather before him, the Aga Khan has dedicated his leadership to the well-being of all Muslims, helping them overcome the challenges of tumultuous historical changes. Today, the Ismailis live in some twenty-five countries, mainly in West and

Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as in North America and Western Europe. Over the four decades since the present Aga Khan became Imam, the world has witnessed major political and economic changes in most of these areas.

What is admirable about him is that he has adapted the complex system of administering the Ismaili community, pioneered by his grandfather during the colonial era, in a new world of nation-states. The changes that have swept through these countries have had tremendous influence on the Aga Khan and his thoughts.

As he said in 2006 in a speech to the graduates of the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University: "While I was educated in the West, my perspective over these fifty years has been profoundly shaped by the countries of South and Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, where the Ismaili people live and where they are largely concentrated. For five decades, that has been my world -- my virtually permanent preoccupation."

He also spoke about the hopes and frustrations of the people

living through these changes. As he put it: "For the developing world, the past half-century has been a time of recurring hope and frequent disappointment. Great waves of change have washed over the landscape -- from the crumbling of colonial hegemonies in mid-century to the recent collapse of communist empires. But too often, what rushed in to replace the old order were empty hopes, not only the false allure of state socialism, non-alignment, and single-party rule, but also the false glories of romantic nationalism and narrow tribalism, and the false dawn of runaway individualism."

Ismailis, regarded as a peace-loving people, have a strong presence in Bangladesh, making important contributions to the country's economic development as well as promoting services, especially in education and health. The community is strongly involved in the garments, engineering, food, and chemicals industries. However, to most people in Bangladesh the Ismailis are known more for their active involvement in philanthropic and social causes than their business. Consider the help the Aga Khan Foundation has

been providing to Brac, the world's largest NGO, in promoting non-formal education in Bangladesh.

In the past 12 years the foundation has donated about \$75 million to support the non-formal schooling and poverty alleviation programs run by Brac. Education is one of the critical areas of human development that is most valued by His Highness the Aga Khan.

He believes that the world should be prepared to manage changes -- whether positive or negative. To quote him: "There is no greater form of preparation for change than investments in education."

The investments, he said, must focus on excellence in education and teachers of the highest quality -- teachers who are creative and committed to their own life-long learning and self-improvement.

According to him it also means investments in facilities that provide an environment conducive to building self-esteem, leadership, tolerance, ethical judgment and moral reasoning.

The Aga Khan school in Utara Model Town provides an excellent example. Established in

1988 with 14 students and 7 teachers, it has now grown into one of the leading English medium schools in Bangladesh.

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Khan Foundation (AKF) supported ICDDR, in a number of activities, including the field testing of the efficacy of the rice-based ORT, which provides easily available non-expensive treatment of diarrhoea patients.

During a recent meeting with Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed a delegation from Prince Aga Khan Shia Imami Council for Bangladesh explained how the community has been making contributions in the country's socio-economic development.

The Aga Khan Development Network has been set up in Bangladesh to help boost social development and reduce poverty. The Aga Khan Foundation is now working to develop the country's education sector, besides co-operating with NGOs in their capacity building.

The Aga Khan is expected to visit Bangladesh sometime during the golden jubilee celebrations that will take place from July 2007 to July 2008. Bangladesh eagerly looks forward to welcoming him.

Farid Hossain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.