

Reforms must be hurried

NIZAM AHMED

"Democracy subordinates the pursuit of truth ... by the whim of the incompetent and untrained" -- David Gordon, Mises Institute, US.

BA NGLADESH politics has reached a comical stage, with the few surviving sycophants trying to prove "who is the most loyal to the chief" in the hope that sometime soon they will emerge as the key party functionaries with the ouster of others. The loyalist leaders are also hoping that the numerous party crawlers who had used politics as their tool for personal gains and privileges will somehow rise and chase the reformers away.

One such loyalist, who usually excels in road shows like forcing innocent commuters to dismount from their rickshaws to comply with harkals, and even attempting to strip male office goers off their shirts, is Motia Chowdhury.

Had there been no emergency in the country, she would have exhibited some other obnoxious public theatrics to exhibit her loyalty. Sycophancy like hers has prevented our leadership from establishing democracy and accountability, despite the promises.

Hasina may have thousands and thousands of loyalists ready to take to the streets, as they have for the last 25 years, but a government and the laws of a country must protect, at all times, the political minority, or the reformists, or any individual spokesperson, from the thuggery of a party majority.

Reforms must mean the development of institutions, like the courts, the media, and the police, which will protect critics, the opposition, or those who question the political elite.

Reforms must also mean that no group can impose harkals or engage in picketing or blockades, unless the people willingly choose

to observe such programs. This is the test of a true democratic government -- the protection of the political minority. Democracy is not the rule of the majority, or by the majority, but a structure that will shield the "minority of all minorities" -- the individual citizen.

However, those who still favour the supremacy of the discredited political leadership clearly want the return, not the reform, of the old political ways. They want the state institutions to remain divided, but between the two families.

By supporting Hasina or Khaleda, or by getting them together, and by challenging the reform task, they fancy the permanent postponement of change within the parties and in the country. With political restructuring, dynastic politics is bound to end. It will crumble quickly if political reforms are rushed, hence the hard resistance from the loyalist pack and their ill will towards those who demand reforms.

However, the reformers in the parties and the country seem hesitant with their proposals, which is good news for the sycophants. The opponents of reform, in defence, cite various democratic procedures that they must follow within their parties before any reform, but their noble intentions are mere speech, and never beyond it, as we have experienced. They unconvincedly claim that they conduct their activities by following organisational rules and procedures, and democratic principles.

Ideally, both the organisations should start from scratch, and begin to operate only after they complete organisational reforms, and after their formal registration with the EC. Any political party wishing to contest polls, at any level, must abide by certain rules, which the EC must make compulsory. The EC is not just a body for preparing a voter list for power-

mongers, but is required to supervise and monitor the activities of registered political organisations.

Reforms like strict financial accountability of party income and expenditure, and the practice of using the ballot box for policy issues and in choosing party leaders are the most important. The rest, like age limit, collective leadership, two or more terms, two posts, or one, are unimportant, and are the private issues of the individual parties.

Collective leadership, as proposed by some reformers, is also a form of a dictatorial pact, a syndicate, and a political cartel. Power is used best when it is dispersed. It is totalitarian when given to an authority, to one person, or to a group of persons. The very purpose of reform is the dismantling of political authority, not its renaming or redesigning.

Bangladeshis have always wrongly defined politics (*rajniti*) as the rule of rajas and aristocrats.

This is a distorted definition of politics. Politics is not a rule of the elite but a condition where principles stay supreme -- *nitir raja*-- to quote a wise TV talk-show participant.

Laws, if correctly formulated, will be decisive and final, not the leaders, parties, dynasties, or people's majority. None of these will rule the people, neither will the majority. We will have no rulers, but a rule of law and a rule by law.

A liberal constitution that upholds the rights of the minority and does not succumb to the will of the majority, or its tyranny, can be the single most important public accord in a free society holding diverse views and beliefs but coexisting harmoniously, securely, freely, and without obedience or servility to any group, person, or majority.

Motia Chowdhury quotes the Wall Street Journal, which says that if Hasina and Khaleda are taken out of politics Bangladesh

will risk the rise of religious terrorism. What Mrs. Chowdhury is not saying is that it was because of the undemocratic, haughty, and shady politics of the two women that violence has become a national threat and an international concern.

I strongly feel that if dynastic dominance in politics continues, religious and social violence will become a certainty. Only a liberalised economy, reformed politics, and firm rule of law can avert such a catastrophe.

Hasina's ways were wrong and erroneous, a mob rule, and the way out, or in, for her and her loyalists is in accepting the demand for reforms without accusing party colleagues of conspiracy. That will merely create unwanted political anxiety.

Motia is cunningly doing politics by waiting in front of Sudha Sadhan, but if she really wants to see her netri she should go to government officers who can

permit her to do so. Unlike the loyalists of the past, the thousands of supporters and stalwarts of Hasina or Khaleda, and their pampered organisers, are the shameless beneficiaries of power and politics. They are, today, on the run, or in prisons, as the situation has unexpectedly turned sour for them.

The good and the dedicated have no energy or reason to work for a party head who not only failed them but probably also deceived them. Reformers should not pause nor panic, but speed up their efforts without fearing acts of vengeance or settling of scores, which are least likely if reforms, both economic and political, are hurried, kept honest, liberal, and democratic.

Nizam Ahmad is Director, Liberal Bangla, UK.

Siege at Lal Masjid

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THE siege at Islamabad's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), and the recent thwarted terrorist attacks in London, involving an Iraqi-born doctor, are the latest symptoms of what ails the Muslim world.

Unwilling to take stock of the causes of its decline, the global Muslim community is trapped between the rhetoric of thoughtless radical clerics, the hate and anger of their violence-prone followers, and the opportunistic behaviour of governments lacking legitimacy.

The clerics of Lal Masjid encouraged their students to impose their brand of Islam through vigilante actions. They used their pulpit to imbue their disciples with violent rage against rival sects, other religions, the United States, the trappings of a westernized life, the regime of General Pervez Musharraf, and those individuals who they considered were indulging in un-Islamic behaviour.

Over the last several months, young students of institutions attached to Lal Masjid, Jamia Fareedia and Jamia Hafsa (including women) forcibly took over a public library and kidnapped women they accused of prostitution. They forced video shops to close down their businesses, and dispensed instant justice in an unofficial court. Maulana Abdul



Bullet holes in the facade of Lal Masjid, Islamabad.

Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi constantly exhorted their flock to Taliban-like vigilantism and terrorism, which they described as Jihad.

The oratory of the two Lal Masjid clerics is similar to the hate-filled preaching of other self-styled Jihadist Islamists around the globe. Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad and Abu Hamza al-Masri of London, and Abubakar Basheer of Indonesia, are other examples of radical clergy that urges Muslims to wage war against the west and use terrorism to somehow restore the past glory of

Muslims.

At the heart of these clerics' world view is an incorrect diagnosis of contemporary Muslim humiliation and weakness. The current state of the Ummah -- the Muslim community of believers -- is the result of a failure to keep up with knowledge, science and technology, modern means of wealth generation, and evolved systems of political and social organisation.

But the rhetoric of the radicals attributes the Muslims' decline to the rise and power of the west, and recommends random violence as a means of levelling the global play-

ing field.

Their argument seems to be that since Muslims cannot beat the west in terms of modernity, they should seek to eliminate modernity and revert to their glorious past by emulating the lifestyle of Islam's pioneers.

Instead of recognising the need to modernise the Muslim world, the Jihadists claim they can Islamise the modern world through furious speeches and violence.

Many ordinary Muslims, such as the Lal Masjid students and the Iraqi-born British doctor and his partners who plotted the recent foiled attacks in London, accept

the flawed logic of the radical clerics and adopt terrorism as their line of attack in what they believe is a millennial struggle between Islam and un-Islam.

But some of the radical clerics do not practice what they preach, like Maulana Abdul Aziz who opted to escape his besieged mosque in a burqa, notwithstanding his exhortations to martyrdom. Others lead their followers to death and injury, with little to show as the positive outcome of their grandstanding.

The opportunism of rulers lacking in legitimacy further aggravates the tragedy caused for the Muslim world by radical clerics and their ill-motivated followers.

For several months, General Pervez Musharraf's military regime did little to stop Lal Masjid -- located in the heart of Pakistan's capital and not far from the headquarters of the country's major intelligence agency -- from becoming a radical stronghold.

Pakistan's ubiquitous intelligence agencies clearly failed to correctly estimate the strength of the armed men and potential suicide bombers holed up in the mosque and the library occupied by the Pakistani Taliban.

The fact that Pakistani intelligence operatives have been found tapping the chief justice's telephone and taking pictures inside his home reveals the real problem of the Musharraf regime. Its priorities are misplaced. If the energy

spent on spying on judges and political opponents was focused on finding and fighting Islamist extremists and terrorists, the situation at Lal Masjid would have been pre-empted.

General Musharraf is simply muddling through, instead of evolving a clear vision backed by a coherent strategy that would make Pakistan a normal (as opposed to a troubled) state.

Musharraf's government is not alone in allowing menace to lurk, as part of a grand design to convince the international community that the authoritarian ruler alone can keep the lid on a perilous pressure cooker.

Other governments in the Muslim world have engaged in similar patterns of behaviour, alternately nourishing and fighting extremism, with little regard for the long-term consequences. As a result of these rulers' self-serving attitudes, the crisis of the Muslim world continues to deepen.

Radical Islamists often claim that "Islam is in danger." But this danger comes primarily from terrorism, economic and knowledge poverty of Muslims, and lack of progress that prevents Muslims from being equal partners in the contemporary world.

Husain Haqqani is Director of Boston University's Center for International Relations, and Co-Chair of the Islam and Democracy Project at Hudson Institute, Washington D.C. He is author of the book *Pakistan between Mosque and Military*.

Merkel wins a big point

IMRAN KHALID

"I am happy about what we have achieved during our presidency. It's been an incredibly exciting time, but also very challenging," said German Chancellor Angela Merkel while pointing towards her success in clinching an agreement on a reform treaty from her European counterparts at last month's EU summit in Brussels. She has obvious reasons to be excited about her performance as the rotating president of the European Union during the first half of this year.

Labeled as "Miss World" by diplomatic circles, because of her extraordinary negotiating skills, Merkel had almost lost hope of reaching an agreement at the Brussels summit on the question of

member states vote on decisions that might affect the whole alliance -- fearing the erosion of its influence as a big player owing to its demographic numbers.

Poland demanded that the voting system be based on the square root of the number, in millions, of the population of each state. Poland's resistance was so stiff -- and there was clear evidence that the Polish leadership was bent upon denying Merkel the chance of ending her EU presidency on a triumphant note -- that other influential European leaders had to step in to put pressure on it to agree on some sort of compromise.

Alleging that Germany was treating its eastern neighbour neocolonially, and refusing to accept it as European partner, Poland went full throttle to wreck the deal on the



a new "reform treaty" to salvage the 27-member alliance from the state of perpetual stagnation that enveloped it after the Netherlands and France said "no" to the European constitution in 2005.

"In the G8, and in the European Union, you cannot achieve anything on your own, if others don't believe that the time is right to reach certain decisions. Without that, you are lost. But that was never the case, and that was the most important experience for me," Merkel divulged after the historic Brussels summit that once again spurred the European Union to resume its journey towards a politically and economically united Europe.

Prior to the summit, which also denoted the culmination of Merkel's six-month-presidency of the EU, the atmosphere was extremely gloomy for any rapprochement among the major members of the EU -- particularly a group of hard-line states like Britain, the Netherlands, the Czech republic and Poland -- on the matter of how to overhaul and run the EU in the coming days.

Just days before the summit, Merkel practically abandoned the hope of a positive outcome. "A solution is still not in view," said Chancellor Merkel in her speech to the Bundestag, the lower house of Germany's parliament, one week ahead of the crunch summit in Brussels. A bad-tempered European summit was facing a near-collapse because of Polish resistance to a German blueprint on how to run the European Union.

Poland, the biggest of the central European member states, with a population of 38 million, displayed strong reservations about revising EU voting mechanisms. Poland showed its concerns over the plans to reform the way that EU

reform treaty. Despite hectic diplomatic parleys among the major EU members, Poland stood alone at the summit to challenge and block the perceived German success. So much so that, in the run up to the summit, Polish Premier Jaroslaw Kaczynski stunned his European colleagues by demanding compensation for Polish suffering in World War Two.

The Polish argument was that, had it not been for the Nazi occupation and the murder of six million Poles, Poland would have been much bigger, and more powerful in the EU. It was a really testing time for Merkel, who was desperate to break Polish opposition to the reform treaty which, it complained, would curtail Warsaw's voting power and give more say to big members, particularly Germany.

The matter had reached a deadlock when Chancellor Merkel showed her trump card by threatening to launch treaty negotiations without Warsaw's involvement -- prompting a final dash for compromise, albeit in lieu of certain heavy discounts for Poland. This was certainly the most important diplomatic success for Merkel, to win the nod of approval for the start of negotiations on the reform treaty, which is expected to revitalize the bloc.

On the domestic front, she has already proven to be a very effective manager, bringing about robust economic growth and political stability despite sitting on the shoulders of an ostensibly fragile coalition. Now, with the success of the Brussels summit, Merkel is in a much better position to assume the much-desired lead role in the European Union.

Dr. Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Bin Laden's army

ED HUSAIN

BRITAIN is a nation in shock. Two years ago, home-grown Islamist terrorists carried out suicide bombings on London's mass transit network, killing 52 people, and now, foreign medical workers working in British hospitals have been arrested in connection with the London and Glasgow plots aimed at inflicting death and mayhem on innocent people. Unlike most Brits, I am not surprised that most of the terror suspects are doctors.

As a teenager, I attended extremist Islamist meetings with tens of medical students at the Royal London Hospital. Islamists in almost every British medical school held similar meetings. At Britain's most prestigious engineering colleges, including Brunel University and Imperial College, fanatical Islamists with a worldview of separatism and violence recruited without impediment -- yesterday's Islamists are today's terrorists.

Right from the very top of the terrorist hierarchy, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri downward (Bin Laden's Egyptian deputy); the soldiers of extremism have all traveled a similar path: past membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, a secular education, rejection of mainstream Muslims, a hatred for the West and ultimately taking up arms against peoples and governments.

The rank-and-file of Islamist organisations, the precursors to terrorism, are filled with activists with a technical education. The

instructor of my first secret cell in Hizb ut-Tahrir in London was a town planner; my second cell-leader was a medical doctor. Even today, medical doctors manage the British arm of Hizb ut-Tahrir--a global Islamist political party working for the re-establishment of an Islamic caliphate: doctors Nasim Ghani, Abdul Wahid, and Nazreen Nawaz.

Globally, the central leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir is a Jordan-based engineer, Abu Rishta. The story of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is similar. When Islamists graduate to jihadist terrorism the profile is equally chilling.

Osama bin Laden ran a construction company in Saudi Arabia and later, the Sudan. His deputy, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, is a Cairo-trained paediatrician. The mastermind behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, is a mechanical engineer who studied at North Carolina University. The lead hijacker, Mohammed Atta, was a student of urban planning in Hamburg.

Without exception, Islamist movements attract urbanites with a secular, technical educational background. Medical and engineering colleges across the world only accept the most intelligent students, the highest of academic achievers. In the Arab world, the parental and social pressures on young people to pursue medical and engineering careers only compounds the misery of creative young minds, forced to study subjects under duress. Thousands of undergraduates seek greater meaning in life, an experience beyond the mundane necessities

of medicine, and a purpose that occupies their free time. Islamist networks neatly slot into this void.

As a teacher at the University of Damascus in Syria, I listened to the frustrations of my students who yearned to study subjects that interested them: literature, philosophy, theology, history, or art. But becoming a doctor was the only way to please their parents, attain high social status and in many cases escape the Arab world and

live in the West. Sadly, often that "escape" radicalises young Arabs.

When in Britain, for example, they become misfits among English cultural exclusivity and develop their own socio-religious networks. Suddenly there appears a need to display their being excessively Muslim: beards grow longer, trousers shorter, music condemned, confrontational politics advocated and the company of women shirked.



The terror suspects arrested in Britain all manifested these traits. This turning to Wahhabi Islam, an austere form of Saudi religiosity, combined with political Islamism, has proven to be a lethal cocktail. What we call 'Al Qaeda' is only one manifestation of that mindset.

In the past, Muslims did not pronounce on religious matters without the endorsement of trained theologians, the ulama. The ulama were the bastion of religious knowledge that operated in an informal yet consensual method of intellectual plurality, interpretational elasticity, and maintained a centuries-old chain of transmission of sacred knowledge, known as the *ijaza*.

Before modern-day terrorists turned to destroying buildings and killing innocents, they violently rejected this millennium-old Muslim tradition of learning. The founder of the Wahhabi school killed scholars who disagreed with him in Najd, and as late as the 1980s Islamists assassinated leading ulama in Egypt and Syria.

Free from the constraints of traditional learning and the learned, Wahhabi-Islamists developed their theology of terror: those who disagree must be killed. What started as intolerance, ended up as justification for mass killing.

Islamists and jihadist networks lack the support of the ulama. Just as their bombing techniques are amateur and desperate, often destined to failure, so is their reading of scripture and warped justification for suicide bombings and killing humans. They approach the Qu'ran as though it were an engineering manual, with instructions for right and wrong conduct. Literalism and ignorance domi-

nates their readings.

This flaw is deepened by the haughty mindset of the engineer or medical doctor that academic achievement, a place at a university, now qualifies him to approach ancient scripture without the guidance of the ulama. To the Islamist engineer, centuries of context, nuance, history, grammar, lexicon, scholarship, and tradition are all lost and redundant. The do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude to religious texts, fostered by doctors and engineers of secular colleges, produces desperate, angry suicide bombers devoid of spiritual guidance.

The DIY attitude to Islamic sources not only produces terrorism, it has the potential to destroy 1,400 years of cumulative knowledge, the bedrock of civilisations from Spain to China. The modern Islamism of doctors and engineers threatens Islam and Muslims before it unleashes itself in the West in the form of suicide and car bombs. The almost daily carnage in Baghdad, Muslim killing Muslim, is the outcome of the Wahhabi theology of terror that considers Shi'a Muslims as infidels.

More than ever before, mainstream Muslims and the West have common cause in reclaiming Islam from Islamists -- Bin Laden's army of literalist doctors and DIY engineers threaten us all.

Ed Husain is author of *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left*. © Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.