

Muslims and the contemporary challenge

The twin plagues of obscurantism and violence in the name of Islam can only be defeated through the Qur'an. Religion is not merely the opiate of the people as the Marxists believed, but if wrongly interpreted it is the poison that destroys society.

S. IFTIKHAR MURSHED

WHEN the Egyptian-born theologian, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, died on October 18, 1505, it is said that "his reputation as a scholar and the aura of godliness which were already his during his lifetime, then reached their zenith; his clothes were bought as if they were relics." Although he lived for only sixty years, a 1983 study credits him with the authorship of 981 works, the central message of which was "everything is based on the Qur'an."

The Qur'an is Islam, and there cannot be a more precise definition of the religion. In the early phase of their history, when Muslims adhered to its injunctions they were able to bring progress and enlightenment to the world. When they deviated from its teachings, the civilisation they had built crumbled.

Civilisations, as Toynbee said, are born and continue to grow so long as they are able to meet the challenges of their times, but they decay when they fail to respond. Muslims were able to contribute to the intellectual ascent of man through the spirit of scientific enquiry but the complacency, which often accompanies success, rendered them incapable of confronting the new realities and all that they had achieved withered.

About four hundred and fifty years after Suyuti's death, the nineteenth century reformer, Jalal ad-Din Afghani, wrote: "Every Muslim is sick, and the only remedy is the Qur'an", but to some

writers in the West, such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, "the sickness gets worse the more the remedy is taken."

This perception has been reinforced after 9/11 and the continuous wave of terrorist violence perpetrated mostly, but not exclusively, by a radicalised minority who profess Islam. As a consequence, the Qur'an's doctrinaire emphasis on non-aggression has been obscured, and the erroneous belief that it encourages violence was strengthened.

For their part, Muslims constantly refer to the hatred of their religion as a recurrent theme of history. They feel that the political and military violence against them did not end with the Crusades or even with the successful completion of the Reconquista in Spain when, on January 2, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella received the keys of the Alhambra, the Muslim palace in Grenada.

On August 3 of that year, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus sailed west as the leader of a small fleet provided by Isabella and reached the Bahamas, which he thought was near China. The voyage symbolised a new phase of European expansionism.

Insofar as the Islamic world was concerned, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed aggression against and occupation of Muslim territories in the Middle East and North Africa. In 1830, the French colonised Algiers, and the British captured Aden in 1839. These colonial powers between



Suicide bombing is against Qur'anic injunctions.

them took Tunisia in 1881, Egypt in 1882, the Sudan in 1889 and Libya and Morocco in 1920.

They promised independence to these countries but, in effect, divided the region between themselves into spheres of influence and occupation. The end objective of the colonisers was the perpetual subordination of the occupied territories through subtle cultural imperialism long after the latter regained their independence.

Through all this and much more the "crusader" attitude towards Islam continued to prevail in the West. On entering Jerusalem in 1917, General Allenby boasted that "the crusades had been completed," and when the French troops reached Damascus their commander went straight to Saladin's tomb in the Great Mosque and declared: "We

have returned, Saladin!"

From 1945 till the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the US-led West was selective in its approach to the Islamic world. It supported those countries that could promote its Cold War objectives but was, at best, indifferent to those it did not need to defeat communism. The Islamic countries supported by the West during the Cold War era were ruled either by autocratic republican regimes or by absolute monarchies. Despite their horrendous human rights records, they were considered "moderate" because they were anti-communist.

The arms race between the Cold War superpowers sapped the Soviet Union of its economic lifeblood and presaged the collapse of communism. The decisive battle of the Cold War in fought and won for the West in

Afghanistan by Muslims. They were trained, indoctrinated, armed and given financial assistance with the approval and support of the West and the more affluent "moderate" Islamic countries, notably Saudi Arabia.

Thousands of volunteers from Muslim countries, and particularly the Arab world, were flown to training camps in Pakistan and sent into Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation forces. They were acclaimed as the "mujahideen" (holy warriors) and were lionised as the heroes of the liberation struggle.

The Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of what President Reagan regarded as the "evil empire" dealt an irreversible body-blow to the communist ideal. The triumph, however, was short-lived because of the emergence of a new threat to global peace and security in the form of religion-motivated terrorist violence.

The same extremists who had been trained, indoctrinated, financed and equipped by the so-called free world to defeat the Soviet forces in Afghanistan now had a free hand to pursue an agenda of their own. They distorted the tenets of Islam and, ironically, their primary victims have been Muslims.

Muslims, therefore, need to understand the liberal and moderate emphasis of the Qur'an or else this religion, which does not believe in priesthood, will continue to be exploited by those whose agenda is based on violence. But here one encounters a formidable problem because, despite Islam's emphasis on knowledge and learning, the level of literacy and education is alarmingly low in Muslim countries. Even more disconcerting is that little is being done to rectify this problem.

The extent of regression is evident

from a telling comment in a survey done by the United Nations Development Programme in July 2002: "In the 1,000 years since the Caliph Mamoun...the Arabs have translated as many books as Spain translates in a single year."

A recent study shows that 57 Muslim majority countries have an average of ten universities each. This means that there are not even 600 universities catering to 1.5 billion Muslims. In contrast, India has 8,407 universities and the US 5,758. No less appalling is the finding that there are less than 300,000 Muslims who qualify as scientists i.e., 230 scientists per one million Muslims. In comparison the US has 1.1 million scientists (4,099 per million) and Japan 700,000 (5,095 per million). It is revealing that in the past 109 years the world's 1.5 billion Muslims have produced only 9 Nobel laureates while a mere 14 million Jews have produced 167 Nobel Prize winners.

The twin plagues of obscurantism and violence in the name of Islam can only be defeated through the Qur'an. Religion is not merely the opiate of the people as the Marxists believed, but if wrongly interpreted it is the poison that destroys society. The correct understanding of the Qur'an requires education, and this must be the first step in the reformation of Islamic societies. The process is long and there are no quick-fixes.

Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Haq once described life as "the eternal struggle which man wages on behalf of himself, against himself," and this is precisely the struggle that Muslims need to wage if they are to retrieve even a semblance of the glory that once was theirs.

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Will there be a correction in our capital market?

Riding on rumours will not get the individual investors far. Believe it or not, the market does correct itself, and it does that logically, but that is not desirable at the expense of mass people's savings.

MAMUN RASHID

RECENTLY, an article in an English daily caught my eyes as it mentioned rickshaw pullers applying for a mutual fund IPO. It immediately reminded me of the famous quote by Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.: "When even shoeshine boys are giving you stock tips, it's time to sell." Mr. Kennedy, being an astute investor, did pick the signal that there might be something wrong with the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE).

An old Wall Street saying has it that when everybody is getting into the market and even the shoeshine boy is giving stock tips (or the barber/hairdresser or the taxi driver or the waiter or the bartender), it's time to sell. Mr. Kennedy was proven right by saving his millions of dollars from the crash. The question is: are we not taking our cue or is it my banker mind at its sceptic extreme? I sincerely hope this time I am proven wrong.

All are aware that Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) indices marked records by reaching new heights during the last 2 weeks. People whose bread and butter are involved with the capital market have welcomed the increased fund flows or liquidity to the market. However, a "deep dive" analysis is possibly long due to identify the growth drivers.

It is all very good that more and more individual investors are interested in the capital market, and more importantly the lower-income group is able to generate enough surplus cash despite the inflationary effects. But bad investment choices are only as good as

never-earned income.

The capital market is the engine of growth for an economy. It performs a critical role in acting as an intermediary between savers and companies seeking additional financing for business expansion. It is encouraging to see that the capital market of Bangladesh is growing, but a repetition of the '96 scenario will throw us far away from the growth trajectory.

Have we learnt anything from that event? Unsatisfactory return will have a long-lasting effect in the mind of investors, which will take years to forget. In addition, international media's focus on Bangladesh has significantly increased in recent years. This poses an additional risk of making headlines like "unstable stock market makes the economy vulnerable" -- nothing being preempted though. We have come a long way in trying to build a strong brand for the country. Negative attention from overseas counterparties is the last thing we can afford right now.

My late-night and early-morning researches left me more confused than ever. There are firms listed in the stock exchange that have historically strong financials, stable earnings, more or less quality management and new projects at hand that are expected to drive their future growth. These firms also operate in the most lucrative industry or business segments -- power, telecommunications and the like.

Surprisingly enough, my limited study suggests that some of these stocks are not part of the upward rally. For some of them, the issue price and traded stock prices are almost same

or nearing same. This could possibly be because recent issues have got the benefits of a hiked up market situation, thereby securing relatively higher issue price at the time of public floatation. However, their current status does not necessarily adequately reflect the growth stories they have to tell as well as prospects these industries promise.

On the other hand, prices of seemingly unheard-of small firms or state-owned enterprises are going up. The Price-to-Earning (P/E) ratios indicate that, theoretically, investors are either willing to wait for 30 years or so to get return on investment or they forecast double-digit earnings growth for these sometime loss-making or marginal profit making entities.

Newspapers regularly publishing the state of the state-owned enterprises of which many are making losses, injuring the national balance sheet. The reasons are debatable though -- focus on government's responsibility to the public rather than driven by profit motive or in general management inefficiencies or bureaucracies -- let's not get into that. The point is: it is no secret which public sector entities are running at losses, or that only few of them are making occasional profits, if at all. Anyone reading the newspapers or even listening to television or radio news has a fair idea.

Stock price embeds, among others, public confidence in management, forecast of future earnings of the firm, governance and of course perception. But that logic does not seem to be working here. Despite talk about lack of confidence and mismanagement, perceived "no prospects," weak governance, etc., prices are going up, even for some of the state owned enterprises. Are innocent people jumping on the bandwagon again?

Access to quality and credible corporate information is still a major improvement area in the market. While a handful of institutional investors may enjoy certain benefits, nothing exists for retail investors. Riding on rumours will not get the individual investors far. Believe it or not, the market does correct itself, and it does that logically, but that is not desirable at the expense of mass people's savings.

Good governance does not have alternative, in this case I support the recent initiatives taken by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and appreciate their capacity issues. But, SEC can only do so much without appropriate support and cooperation from associated organisations or agencies, including the legal system.

Frequent change in guidelines/directives does impact public confidence in the policy-makers, but when market is changing its colour every moment, SEC has no option but to remain alert. I will reiterate the need for a national stock exchange or even demutualisation to avoid conflict of interests. I conclude with another famous quote from economist and investor John Maynard Keynes: "Markets can remain irrational a lot longer than you and I can remain solvent."

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New law for carbon tax

The concept of carbon of tax is completely new in Bangladesh. It would have been better if the state minister had explained what carbon tax is, and why it is so important to impose the tax now.

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IT is reported that the government is planning to revise the existing taxation law to levy a new tax on carbon emission and pollution of the environment. This was disclosed by the state minister for environment and forests at a workshop organised by UNDP in Dhaka recently.

The concept of carbon of tax is completely new in Bangladesh and, as such, it would have been better if the state minister had explained what carbon tax is, what its advantages and disadvantages are and why it is so important to impose the tax now.

Carbon dioxide is one of the major components of greenhouse gases believed to be responsible for global warming and climate change. The idea of carbon tax originated to limit the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, through the combustion of fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas, in order to mitigate the effects global warming and climate change. The carbon tax may be levied on the production, import, distribution or use of fossil fuels depending on the amounts of carbon dioxide produced by such fuels.

With carbon taxes, the costs of carbon emitting fossil fuels will increase compared to the non-carbon-emitting energy sources like renewable energy and nuclear power. Carbon tax is expected to reduce carbon emission into the atmosphere through the reduction of the carbon emitting fuels and encourage the use of environment friendly renewable energy sources and nuclear power.

- Since about 1750, the concentrations of carbon dioxide and some other greenhouse gases have been increasing steadily. The present atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is about 391 ppm by volume. Different scenarios project carbon dioxide concentration to increase to a range of 541-970 ppm by the year 2100. It is generally agreed that:
- The developed countries are mainly responsible for the largest share of past and current global emissions of greenhouse gases;
- Per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low;
- The share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and economic development.

Table-1: Carbon dioxide emission by selected countries:

| Rank of Countries by emission | Country | Annual emission, million metric tons | Percentage of global total | Per capita metric ton |
|-------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| | World | 28,431 | 100% | 4.4 |
| 1 | China | 6,103 | 21.5% | 4.62 |
| 2 | USA | 5,752 | 20.2% | 18.99 |
| 3 | Russia | 1,564 | 5.5% | 10.92 |
| 4 | India | 1,510 | 5.3% | 1.31 |
| 5 | Japan | 1,293 | 4.6% | 10.11 |
| 7 | UK | 568 | 2% | 9.40 |
| 14 | France | 383 | 1.4% | 6.24 |
| 31 | Pakistan | 143 | 0.5% | 0.88 |
| 65 | Bangladesh | 42 | 0.2% | 0.27 |

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