

Protests over anti-Prophet film: Let's not fall into the trap

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN

ONCE again a depraved and dangerous game is being played, one with the aim of increasing religious tensions across the globe. This time it's a film that seeks to defame the Prophet (pbuh) of Islam. Predictably, too many Muslims have reacted with fierce intensity, and with deadly consequence. Angry demonstrators have attacked American embassies in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. In Benghazi, Libya, the American ambassador, three other embassy officials, and several Libyan security staff members were tragically killed.

We deplore and condemn both the audacious bigotry of the film-maker as well as the inexcusable violence of the protesters. The protesters cannot counter the fraudulent claims of the obscure film, *Innocence of Muslims* -- no matter how profane and bigoted it is -- with behaviour that itself harms the image of Islam and its Prophet (pbuh) and Muslims everywhere. Ironically, the world came to know about this film only after American embassies were attacked and the ambassador to Libya was killed. By engaging in violence, the overzealous Muslims are falling into the very trap set up by the bigots.

The Islamophobic campaign is nothing new in America. It is even worse in Europe. The film made by Sam Bacile (who it now appears is actually Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, a California man who was convicted in 2009 of bank fraud) is not the first effort to denigrate Islam and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), nor will it be the last. There have been countless attempts by Islamophobes to incite a fierce reaction in the Muslim community. In some cases, the provocateurs succeeded in eliciting a violent response. On other occasions, their hate-mongering plots faded into obscurity, especially when Muslims decided to ignore them or chose to counter/correct them through dialogue and other civil means. The results were predictably positive: the challenges soon turned into opportunities where Muslims were able to present the truth of Islam to their fellow citizens.

Those who seek to inflame passions will continue their incitements, hoping that Muslims will take the bait. They can then say: "See how violent the Muslims are." The incitements will remain unabated; but Muslims must stop reacting and instead respond to the evil with something that is civil and intelligent and put the bigotry to shame. In fact, the Quran itself commands Muslims to "repel evil with what is better" (Surah 41: Verse 34). The Quran also says: "O you who believe! Be steadfast in the cause of Allah, bearing witness in equity; and let not a people's enmity incite you to act otherwise than with justice. Be always just, that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah. Surely, Allah is aware of what you do" (Surah 5: Verse 9).

The overzealous Muslims, who claim to be defending the honour of the Prophet (pbuh) by attacking the embassies and committing acts of destruction and even murder, need to reflect on how Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) would have responded to a provocation like Sam Bacile's film. The Prophet (pbuh) was a man of patience, peace, and mercy. Even though he was attacked and insulted many times throughout his life, he responded with a high-minded and measured perspective, always inclined to compassion and forgiveness, and never acted out of revenge or in a violence-driven way. Engaging in wanton acts of violence and senseless killing can only serve to defile his sublime legacy in the minds



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of those who don't know him. Muslims in the Middle East and around the world must remember this: We honour the Prophet (pbuh) by following his example of tolerance and patience in the face of hostility.

It is also important for Muslims to recognise that the actions of a person who reviles or mocks the Prophet (pbuh), or even goes so far as to insult or ridicule God Himself, is responsible for his or her own actions. There is no justification for collective blame, whether of the perpetrator's national, religious, or political group, or of the government of the nation he resides in (let alone the ambassador or other embassy officials or staff).

Regrettably, many Muslims across the world have little or no idea as to how American democracy functions and its society operates. They think the American government is

behind, complicit in, or endorsing any Islam-bashing action or statement broadcast from its soil. This is a serious misperception and myth about America that must be dispelled and debunked at every opportunity.

It is true and unfortunate that some biased individuals and organisations are stirring up hatred against Islam and Muslims with unrelenting persistence. The film that is centre stage in the current turbulence is a manifestation of exceeding ignorance and the most ignoble foolishness in its scandalous attack against the Prophet (pbuh), Islam, and Muslims. It aims to tarnish the image of Islam and spoil the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, there are huge numbers of people in America who have condemned this film, and among them are leaders of various faiths, especially Christianity and Judaism. Some non-Muslim academics have even called for Sam Bacile's arrest.

Muslims must think deeply before reacting tempestuously. For overreacting to such provocations will only make things worse. Resorting to violence shouldn't be an option at any time. The maker and sponsors of the anti-Prophet film have undoubtedly put forth a piece of propaganda promoting the worst kind of bigotry; still, this should never be an excuse to commit any act of violence against a person or any destruction of property.

We are certainly not suggesting that Muslims stop defending the Prophet (pbuh). But the best way to defend the Prophet (pbuh) is by conveying to people who he really was, and by emulating his sublime character. We cannot become emotionally overblown and act irrationally every time an Islamophobe insults Islam. We should act with utmost maturity and deal with caution, care and prudence. The Prophet (pbuh) is loved and respected by hundreds of millions of people around the world, and no one can take this veneration from our hearts. So we should not fall into the trap of those who wish to incite our anger and instill hatred in the minds and hearts of non-Muslims. Indeed, there is no God-conscious faith or love for the Prophet (pbuh) in reacting in a brutal and destructive way.

As we mourn the loss of lives, we call on Muslims around the world to "repel evil with what is better." That might entail ignoring a provocation, like the film in question, that is ugly in its purpose but supremely foolish in its content. It might require in presenting a reasoned argument as to why some anti-Islam talking point is erroneous. In all cases, however, repelling evil with what is better demands speech and behaviour that is wise and judicious, with sober awareness that everything we do and say has consequences. If only "Sam Bacile" had observed such prudence.

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Al-Qaeda now a US ally in Syria

JOSEPH WAKIM

WHILE we reflect on the 11th anniversary of the al-Qaeda attacks on American soil, there is a blinding light that may obscure our view: this sworn enemy now fights hand in hand with the US against the Syrian regime.

The historic State of the Union address by US President George W. Bush on September 20, 2001 is loaded with morals and principles about good and evil. The president's ultimatum was clear: either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.

In Syria, there is mounting evidence that al-Qaeda and its allies are actively deploying terror tactics and suicide bombers to overthrow the Assad regime.

Syrian citizens who prefer the secular and stable state to the prospect of an Iraqi-style sectarian state may well be turning this same question around to the US government: are you with us, or with the terrorists?

This week, head of the Salafi *jihad* and close ally of al-Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf, pledged "deadly attacks" against Syria as "our fighters are coming to get you" because "crimes" by the regime "prompts us to *jihad*."

Bush referred to al-Qaeda as the enemies of freedom: "The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews." But Sheikh Muhammad al-Zughbey proclaimed that "your *jihad* against this infidel criminal and his people is a religious duty ...

The US regime should be actively and publicly distancing itself from the foreign terrorists and Salafist jihadists that are proliferating within sovereign Syria. It should be condemning al-Qaeda for its militant intervention. It should be condemning the Saudi sheikhs who issue fatwas for an Alawite holocaust.

Alawites are more infidel than the Jews and Christians." Because the new *jihad* targets Alawites rather than Jews and Christians, does this render them better bedfellows?

By his own admission, Bush stated that al-Qaeda was "linked to many other organisations in different countries ... They are recruited from their own nations ... where they are trained in the tactics of terror ... They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction."

Yet this is precisely how the foreign *jihadists* in Syria have been described by reporters. They are funded and armed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. And they collaborate with the Free Syrian Army which is aided and abetted by the US.

Bush condemned the Taliban regime because they were "sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder." Eleven years later, the parallels produce an uncomfortable truth.

If only the Syrian uprising was as simple as the Arab Spring narrative, where citizens seek democracy and freedom. But those unarmed protests have long since been hijacked by a cocktail of agendas which have little to do with Syrian democracy, and more to do with a proxy war to create a sectarian Sunni state that weakens Shi'ite Iran's main partner in the region.

Bush was correct in claiming that al-Qaeda "want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan" -- who were all US-Israel allies at that time.

But his list stopped short of mentioning Syria or Iraq, the real targets of al-Qaeda. Why does overthrowing Syria, using the same terror tactics, fail to attract the same degree of outrage?

Bush continues: "We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism."

This pledge appears to have fallen on its own sword, given the funding of the *jihadists* in Syria. The terrorists have bred and spread across borders, which is the opposite of Bush's prophecy.

The US administration must come clean about its financial aid. It cannot use one hand to sign a blank cheque to the rebels, and the other hand to cover its eyes to their immoral and illegal tactics. It cannot hide behind "the end justifies the means" as there are too many innocent lives at stake.

Bush rode off on his high horse: "We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them ... may God grant us wisdom."

If the principles and morality are to be taken seriously, then they need to be applied consistently.

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The wisdom that we see is grief over the al-Qaeda crime 11 years ago, yet covert collaboration with this sworn enemy today.

Perhaps the US is applying another principle that they may have learned from their pragmatic Arab allies -- the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

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The Americans amidst us

KANAK MANI DIXIT

THE US should stand up for fresh elections in Nepal, rather than appear to suggest a quick-and-easy path to an unrepresentative constitution.

The headlines of the past week were particularly America-maya. The US State Department de-listed the two Maoist parties from the "terrorist" roster, Peter W. Bodde arrived as the new ambassador, the American Peace Corps resumed operation after an eight-year hiatus, and Assistant Secretary of State Robert O Blake came by, proclaiming the Maoists as "trustworthy" and reportedly suggesting that the only outstanding constitution-drafting issue was federalism.

The long innings of the United States in Nepal's development effort, covering the entire six decades of our modern era, should have given the Americans a socio-political perspective better than other overseas partners. But there is the proverbial lack of institutional memory in the embassies and development agencies.

Like so many others, the US too seems to have been caught off-guard with the rise of Maoism and fall of monarchy. It will be hard to sell Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai as "trustworthy" to the citizenry, against the demands of non-violent politics, democracy and human rights.

The Rapti concession:

The Americans have been in Nepal the longest as donor, starting with providing educational support for the nascent nation-state in the early 1960s -- the University of Oregon trained Nepal's first crop of education administrators. The US was the primary backer of the Colombo Plan, which gave us our first cohort of engineers and doctors. It provided the Royal Nepal Airlines with DC-3 Dakotas, which was how our isolated geography first got connected.

The eradication of malaria as well as the clearing of the Chitwan Valley jungle were both American projects, as was the Hetauda-Kathmandu ropeway, whose cargo carriages can be seen even today dangling forlornly on the Bhimphe-Chitlang tract. American aid was crucial for the spread of wheat cultivation around Nepal, and many of us eat *roti* today because of the Yankees.

The involvement was not always benign. With the acquiescence of the otherwise hostile Indira Gandhi, the US supported the Khamba rebels in Mustang. The CIA's C-130 Hercules flew from Bangkok overflying Indian territory to make airdrops north of Kagbeni. Few will remember that the Americans even had their own airstrip at Siuchatar in Kathmandu Valley.

There was a time when the *anchals* were divided up by donor-country, and the mid-western Rapti Zone was the US "concession." Some scholars will doubtless emerge to study the link, if any, between American projects and the rise of the Maoists' movement in this, their *udgham sthal* (birthing ground).

Terror de-listing:

For sure, it was past time to delist the Maoists from the US "terror" list. Whatever its true intent in fomenting insurgency, the party had already degenerated by the middle of the "people's war." The banditry only increased as the rebels emerged into open society, with the takeover of Kathmandu's casinos signifying so much else. Meanwhile, Messrs Dahal and Bhattarai

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made haste to tell Western and Indian friends that they were fully behind capitalism and "mega projects" -- hardly the stuff of terrorism.

Even as they threatened the citizenry with revolt, the Maoists became the dominant force in the national establishment. Today, they seek to capture state power "from the inside," hence the continuing exercise of the Bhattarai-led caretaker to rule by ordinance. Preventing the slide will require the will and activism of our polity, which is why the crutch of the American "terrorist" tag is unnecessary.

The Assistant Secretary:

Perhaps the State Department understands poorly the Nepali desire for peace and democracy because of its fixation on the Tibet matter. The primary responsibility to ensure that the Tibetan pilgrim-refugees are treated with dignity and fairness lies with the Nepali polity. And the correct response to the pilgrim-refugees requires first and foremost that we remain an open society, which is one more reason why it is important not to be lackadaisical on the constitution-writing.

Assistant Secretary Blake may have been taken in by some wily politicians assuring him that most of the issues in the constitution-writing have been resolved, other than the "names, number and boundaries" of the proposed provinces. This seems like a reading from the Maoist script, actually, and would help support Chairman Dahal in his desperation for a revival of the deceased Constituent Assembly -- to support his fading hopes of a directly-elected presidency.

The Americans got themselves a fine constitution due to those who knew how to fight the populist tide and stand by principle. The land of Jefferson, Madison, Washington and Hamilton should know better than to seem to be advising Nepal to go the way of a quick-and-easy, unrepresentative process of constitution-writing. It is a wonder that overseas and Asian entities, so hyperactive during the constitution non-writing, are not there to support elections as the most elemental matter of a representative democracy.

Back to the village:

The American Peace Corps volunteers (PCV) brought enlightenment to many, many Nepalis across the land in the era before district roads, television, FM radio and overseas travel. With society emerging unprepared into the modern era, the Peace Corps was a phenomenon in more ways than has been articulated, and it is good to have it back.

Numerous PCV alumni are today middle-aged or elderly US citizens, in a position to influence policy, drive tourism, and otherwise support Nepal. No other Peace Corps recipient country probably has so many "ambassadors" in the powerful United States of America. As Nepalis try to bring their polity back on the rails, the revival of the programme will help revive links with the alumni PCVs, which would be a bonanza.

The return of the Peace Corps should also spark the imagination of the Nepali authorities and activists to start genuine "back to the village" programmes, to allow educated young adults of Nepal to serve marginalised locales and communities. There are some organisations already starting on this road, and we do need to revive the spirit of volunteerism that was so effectively harnessed by the National Development Service (NDS) in the 1970s.

The spirit of the Peace Corps is one area where the Nepal can learn from the United States. Another is the spirit of the Founding Fathers -- how about starting with a translation into Nepali of selected essays of the Federalist Papers?

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