**Shades of fascism**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2020-12-31

ONE of the latest charges against Donald Trump is that as president of the United States he has been inclined towards fascism. The evidence presented to justify this qualification includes the outgoing US president`s attempts to undermine the sanctity of the American electoral system, contempt for some movements such as Black Lives Matter, and his decision to pardon some notorious criminals, including the murderer of a nine-yearold child, and rumours about his desire to grant pardon to himself as well. This shows that one doesn`t have to formally proclaim adherence to fascism and unfurl a swastika banner or something like that; the title could be acquired by simply behaving as a fascist.

The essential features of f ascism as revealed in Mussolini`s Italy and Hitler`s Germany were revanchism, that is, celebration of a glorious past (Aryan origins in the case of Hitler`s Germany and ancient Roman glory in the case of Mussolini`s Italy) after greatly magnifying it, denunciation of socialism or projection of the self as genuine socialism blended with nationalism, promotion of a cult figure to lead the community and the need for total obedience to him, invention of enemy figures who had to be liquidated, and frenzied playing up of a persecution theory. The most important objective, namely, creation of bar rier s against a community`s progress towards democracy and an egalitarian order, and preservation of an exploitative system inspired by a supposedly benign capitalism, was rarely allowed to enter the public debate.

In countries gaining nominal freedom from colonialism, techniques resembling fascism have been adopted to suppress popular sdrrings for democracy and social justice. In South Africa, the entire edifice of the apartheid system was dressed up as a holy crusade against communism. Similar justifications were employed to bring many countries including Pakistan into military blocs to achieve purposes far removed from their national interest. The techniques adopted toforce the pill of subjugation down the throats of unwilling peo-ples were often copied from fascist textbooks. In quite a few countries, religion and traditional culture have been used to establish and sustain regimes that fit the definition of f ascism except for the employment of a different nomenclature.

Twentieth-century authors of fascist theories presented their prescriptions as effective antidotes to spurious democracy just as the high priests of Hindutva claim that they are fighting sham secularism and that the potion they are selling is secularism in its purest form.

The Muslim faith too has not escaped exploitation by more than one militant organisation engaged in war to capture an existing state or to use the debris of a failed state to establish a new state-like entity. Muslim states have made themselves particularly vulnerable to fascistic influences by virtually discarding the fourth source of Islamic law, namely ijma (consensus). The Hasba bill of the theocratic government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP) some years ago, which was mercifully struck down by the Supreme Court, was an unfortunate and crude attempt to enforce religious injunctions by state power, which is quite contrary to the spirit of Islam as the latter firmly rejects compulsion in matters of faith.

Indeed, Muslim societies have a particular reason to guard against the use of religion as a cover for making inhuman, cruel and degrading laws and regulations. If a Muslim state commits the blunder of presenting an inhuman or degrading law on the presumption that it is in accordance with religious injunctions, the common citizens will place themselves under double jeopardy if they resist it. One finds it dif ficult to imagine how Pakistan`s coming generations will be able to defend inhuman and degrading punishments, such as chemical castration, that have recently been introduced into the country`s Penal Code.

Thefoundersoffasciststatesinthelastcentury did not put on democratic garbs to sell their stock; they explicitly denounced advocates of democracy as purveyors of extra-democratic formulas drapedin democratic-sounding words, and claimed to be offering genuine democracy.

Another detestable feature of fascism is that it undermines the principle of equality of human beings. It refuses to give equal citizenship to all classes of the population and adopts all kinds of devices to put a variety of individuals and groups outside the category of full citizens. As pointed out earlier, fascists reserve heaviest penalties for groups and classes they identify as enemies of the establishment and the theories on which it is based.

The European fascists of the 20th century differed from one another in various ways. While the German Nazis practised austerity, the Italian fascists indulged in extravagance. The Nazis did not promote familymembersin politics but Mussolini`s cabinet was dominated by his kith and kin. While the German Nazis challenged big powers for a share in world leadership, the Italian fascists targeted a poor and ill-equipped African state (Ethiopia) to prove its martial strength. What was common to German Nazis and Italian fascists was their love of spectacular, mass rallies, held at the slightest pretext, at which the Fuhrer or Il Duce was hailed as the nation`s saviour and a symbol of its collective wisdom and physical strength.

Fascists have a tendency to swear by the law but how unjust their laws can be is nobody`s business.

In the first phase of their life, fascists depend on their street gangs to hound and beat up their political rivals, but once in power they use their secret service, such as the Gestapo of Nazi Germany, and compliant courts to crush dissent. The fascists justify any excesses against their people in the interest of the state. The advocates of national security states are country cousins of fascist theoreticians.

In the post-colonial world, many newly independent countries have followed the fascist route.

Even today, if you find a political leader swearing by an old model of governance and rising as a cult figure you can safely conclude that he is not far from embracing fascism.